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44 Western

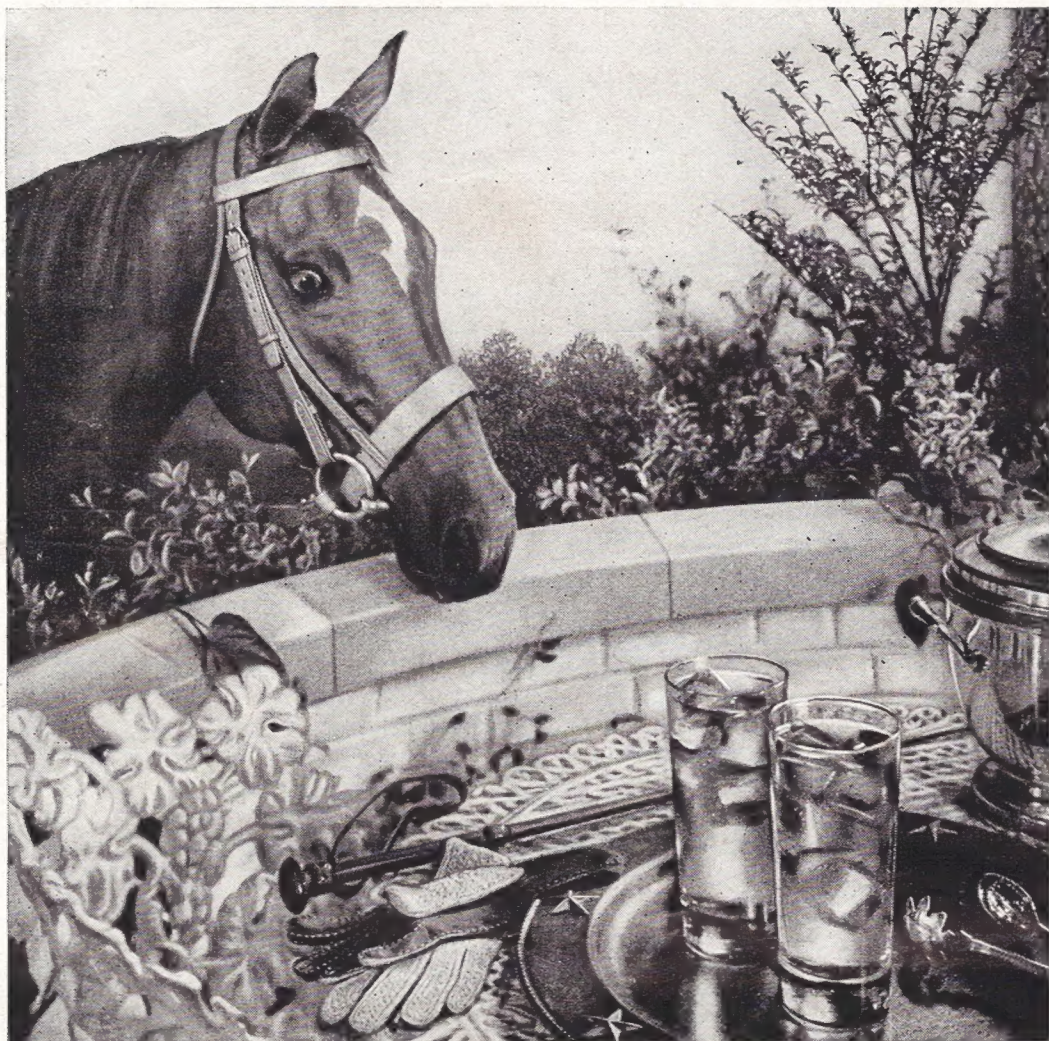
MAGAZINE

NOV.

**LAST OF
THE BOOTHILL
FUGITIVES**
by M. HOWARD LANE



BORN TO GUNSMOKE!
by JOSEPH
CHADWICK



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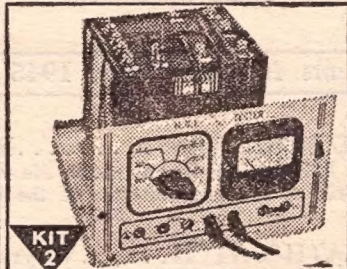
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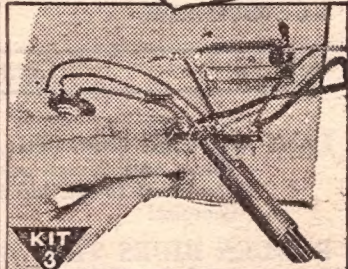
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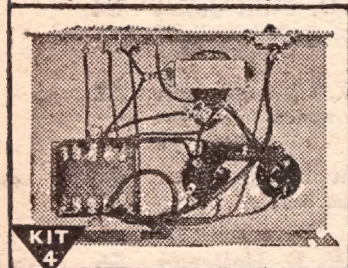
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Early in my course I show you how to build this N.R.I. Tester with parts I send. It soon helps you fix neighborhood Radios and earn EXTRA money in spare time.



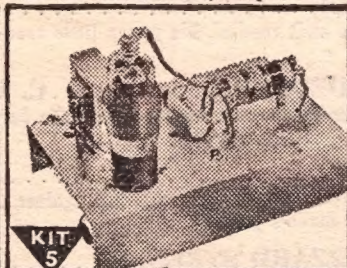
KIT 3

You get parts to build Radio Circuits; then test them; see how they work; learn how to design special circuits; how to locate and repair circuit defects.



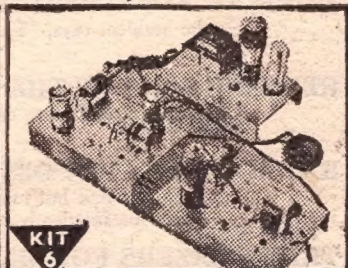
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44 Western

MAGAZINE

ALL STORIES NEW

NO REPRINTS

Vol. 13

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NEXT ISSUE OUT NOVEMBER 21ST

Published bi-monthly by Popular Publications, Inc., 2256 Grove Street, Chicago 16, Illinois. Editorial and executive offices 205 East Forty-second Street, New York City 17. Harry Steeger, President and Secretary, Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter March 7, 1938, at the Post Office at Chicago, Ill., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Title registration pending at U. S. Patent Office. Copyright, 1945, by Popular Publications, Inc. All rights reserved under Pan American Copyright Convention. Single copy price 15c. Yearly subscriptions in U. S. A. (6 issues) 90 cents. Foreign postage, 38c additional. Subscription department, 205 42nd St., New York 17, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts kindly enclose self-addressed, stamped envelope for their return if found unavailable, and send to Editorial Department, 205 East 42nd St., New York City 17, N. Y. The publishers cannot accept responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts although care will be exercised in handling them. For advertising rates address Sam J. Perry, 205 E. 42nd St., New York 17, N. Y. All names used in fiction stories are fictitious. If the name of a living person should accidentally appear, it is a coincidence. Printed in U.S.A.

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★ .44 TALK ★

CIMARRON GEORGE BOLDS is one of the few old-timers who still remembers the West in its heyday. He remembers it because he lived through it. It's been a long time since Cimarron packed a sixgun, or rubbed shoulders, in wild Dodge City and on the Texas plains, with the colorful characters, both good and bad, who built the West. His salty stories, told in his own easy-going style, are all the more valuable because, unlike most old-timers, he remembers to write them down and, written down, they become intimate, salty bits of history. Here is a letter he wrote us about his favorite badman—Clay Allison, "The Curly Wolf Of The Washiti."

Editor, *.44 Western*:

Clay Allison was born down in Tennessee. As a young man, Clay was always in trouble, and escaped jail by many small margins. Clay was a six footer and weighed near one hundred eighty. He was mean, and caused more hell than all the rest of the people in town.

What he wanted, he just grabbed, and most of the citizens feared him. Clay's first defeat came when he tried to steal the preacher's daughter. The preacher caught up with Clay and some of the shot from the preacher's gun caught Clay in the foot and he was a cripple for the rest of his life. This was very humiliating for Clay, and he left for the West.

Clay's disposition was worse than an old diamond-back rattler and he liked to show off. After a few years in Texas he was known as the "Curly Wolf Of The Washiti."

If he didn't win in a poker game, that did not worry him, as he'd follow the fellow who did win, knock him over the head with a six shooter or gut-shoot him, and get the cash. He always boasted that he'd get the money going or coming and no one dared stop him. After roaming over the West for several years from Abeline to Santa Fe and raising more hell than most of the bad men combined, he landed in Lasanimas, Colorado.

Clay, and a fellow who was as bad as Clay or worse, started a small ranch south of Lasanimas. They soon became prosperous. The old timers could not understand why Clay's cows could produce six or eight calves each spring and in the fall nearly all were yearlings or two year olds.

After two years of this successful ranching, Clay's partner suddenly disappeared. He never returned to the ranch. Some feared Clay had killed and buried him so he would be sole owner of the ranch and cattle.

Soon after this Clay's older brother, John, who'd been run out of Tennessee for horse stealing, showed up and joined Clay as part

owner of the ranch. Clay wandered a lot, but made it a point to return to Lasanimas every holiday and prove to the citizens that he was still "the curly wolf of the West."

The Allison's were making the town so dangerous, the citizens hired a marshal to clean the town so they could live in peace. The new marshal's name was Ed Drury. The Allison's were very quiet for a few days. Drury was well liked and seemed to have things in control. John Allison rode into town and started to make trouble with the marshal over a dance hall queen, Marie Alvez. The marshal warned him, and to show his disgust, John shot a Mexican in the leg that was crossing the street and Drury killed him.

Clay was in a saloon when John was shot, and did not go out to see what it was about. Drury knew he'd have Clay to kill and went to the saloon. He entered and got the drop on Clay saying, "I just killed that mean brother of yours and now I'm going to kill you." Suddenly Clay flung his hat in Drury's face. The bullet missed Clay, and he killed the marshal.

Hearing a Grand Jury was called to investigate the killing of the marshal Clay got busy. He went to the judge, and insisted on his appointment as foreman of the jury and named the rest of the panel. The Judge was so scared of Clay, that he agreed.

Clay kept that jury in session night and day for near a week. A big time was had by all. Clay ordered the best of food and drinks sent to the room and paid all bills. He kept Marie Alvez perched upon his knee most of the time while hearing evidence.

Getting tired of this, Clay went to the judge with a paper in one hand and a six-shooter in the other and informed the court the case had been dismissed for want of evidence. The Judge quickly agreed, as it was the only way to keep on living. Before Clay had sobered up he mounted his horse and rode for Dodge City.

(Continued on page 8)

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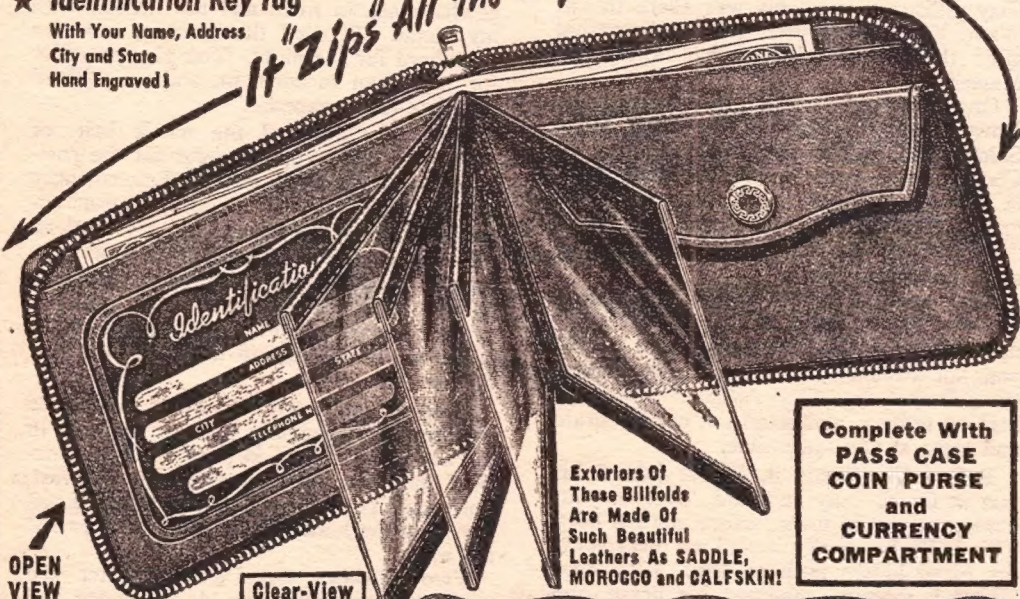
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(Continued from page 6)

Clay had heard that one thousand dollars would be given to the Texan who killed Wyatt Earp, the marshal of Dodge City. This just suited Clay, he'd been shooting up marshals and sheriffs in different states for the hell of it. Now he could kill one and get paid for it. Clay decided that Dodge was definitely the place for him.

Word reached Dodge that the famous Clay Allison was on his way there to kill Wyatt Earp, who'd been appointed marshal after the Texas cowboys had killed Ed Masterson.

One morning Wyatt was talking to Rowdy Kate in front of the Long Horn Saloon and Dance Hall, not thinking of Clay Allison's threat nor caring much about it. A stranger rode up to the rack, and ground-tied his horse and Rowdy Kate said, "Wyatt, look out, that's Clay Allison! I've seen him before."

Clay walked up to Wyatt and asked, "You're Wyatt Earp, ain't you?" "That's me," Wyatt replied. "I came here to kill you, but wanted you to know before I done the job that I'm Clay Allison." Clay just kept on talking, and could not use his brain and guns at the same time.

Before Clay knew it, Wyatt jabbed his gun in Clay's belly and said, "Get on your horse, and out of town, before you get hurt. This is Dodge you're in and we don't stand for hired killers such as you." Clay eyed Wyatt a moment, mounted his horse, and rode out of town to find a place where marshals were not so tough, and forgot all about the reward he came to collect.

Clay next fell in with four fellows who were hazing four hundred head of cattle north. He camped with them and learned the boss was called Gregory. The other three had no names that Clay could learn.

Clay rode with them for four days, as they were headed in his direction. He learned from Gregory that they were all outlaws and rustlers. They'd started in south Texas with twenty head and now had quite a herd. The different brands showed that all the herds in Texas was represented.

Clay, as usual, got an idea. They had stolen all the cattle, and now for him to steal the herd from them seemed simple. He informed Gregory that he had a herd on the way up from southwest Texas to Mobeetie, and should reach there in a week. He was then driving them north to an Indian reservation where they needed beef and no questions asked about brands. He suggested they pool the herds.

When three days out of Mobeetie Clay said he'd have to go on and meet his men

with the herd. When Clay reached Mobeetie, he found three outlaws that were as mean as Clay, if not worse. He related to them his plans for stealing Gregory's cattle.

When Gregory arrived, he left his men in charge, and went to town to locate Clay. Clay seemed overjoyed to see him, and after a few drinks, Clay said, "You and your men have been out a long time. Some of my cowboys are in town and not needed with my cattle. I'll send them out to care for your herd for the night. You give an order for your men to come in, and we will all celebrate at my expense."

Gregory swallowed the whole bait, or seemed to. He wrote an order for the cowboys to turn the cattle over to these cowboys and come to town. If anyone was ever entertained, it was Gregory and his rustlers. This drunken orgy lasted two days and nights. When Gregory and his men sobered up Clay could not be found. They rode out to where they thought they'd left the cattle. None was in sight, and no trace of where they went.

Gregory interested four other rustlers to join him by promising them an interest in the herd, and started in pursuit. For sometime they saw no sign and kept on west, until near the west end of No Man's Land they saw the herd. It was bedded down for the night.

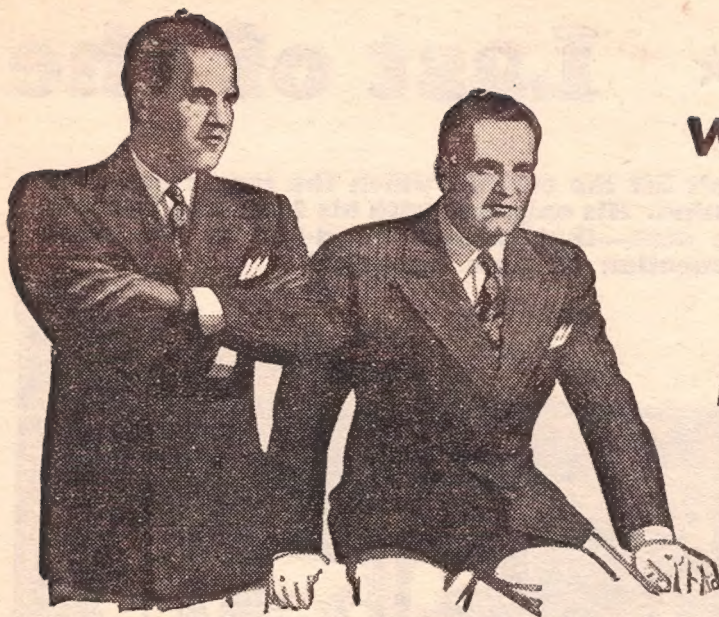
Two cowboys were looking after the cattle, not expecting trouble. Gregory and his men slipped up and overpowered Clay and his men. Tied them up, blindfolded, and gagged them.

Before turning the cattle back east, they stripped Clay and his outfit of all valuables, even taking all their guns. Gregory left the following note saying, "You took me for a sucker at Mobeetie. My headquarters is in No Man's Land. My advice to the great Clay Allison is: when you get loose proceed to your ranch and reform. I will call on you soon. Not Gregory, but Black Bart Gonzales."

Nearly a day passed before they got loose, and found the note. When Clay read it he had the shock of his life. He'd played the greatest outlaw and rustler in the West for a sucker and lost. He was happy to be alive, and returned to his ranch in Colorado where he spent his last days.

Thanks, Cimarron George, for this wonderful and authentic addition to *.44 Western's* files on the Old West. Always glad to hear from you, old-timer, write again real soon.

—THE EDITOR



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Last of the

Andy Kane couldn't lift the curtain which the tragic past had drawn across his mind. His only link with his forgotten life was a streaking white scar—that turned blood-red at the mere mention of Bate Benedict!



CHAPTER ONE

Do Unto Others—

YOUNG Andy Kane doubted if a happier lad than himself, had ever lived. He was sixteen years old, and the world was as bright as a new silver

dollar. He glanced at the erect figure of Ben Kane, his dad, racking along beside him, and he felt his heart grow big beneath the dusty blue of his shirt.

His mother was nothing but a dim memory, for she had died when he was two years old, and Ben had taken over the

Boothill Fugitives

A Dramatic Cow-Country Novelette

By M. Howard Lane



The gunslick screamed hoarsely and came lurching from the alley.

double chore of being both father and mother. He'd done a good job at it, too, as young Andy's strong body and clean-cut face testified. Ben had done more than that as the years had worn on. He'd quit ramrodding spreads for other men and bought a run-down ranch in Arizona's Sulphur Springs Valley. He'd registered as the Double K and started to build a herd by combing maverick longhorns out of the wild Pelancillo Hills flanking the valley on the south. He'd even combed small bunches from the Chiricahuas, disdainful of losing

all his hair to Geronimo and his Apaches.

During those years, other hardy souls had baved Apache death. Patiently they searched the barren hills and brushy draws for gold.

Those prospectors hadn't found gold, but one of them, Ed Schefflein, had discovered something almost as precious. Silver! Silver in the hills behind a lions-paw plateau that stretched to the lazy streak of the San Pedro river to westward. There he could envisage a town rising near the mines where the muckers would tear wealth

from the heart of the hills. Tucson friends had warned him that all he'd find in this wild country was his tombstone, so Ed Scheifflein had forthwith christened the town he'd envisioned—it would be known to all as Tombstone.

He'd staked his claims, and loaded a pack mule with rich float. An assay of that ore in Tucson had started the rush. It was California all over again. Tombstone had grown overnight on the lions-paw shelf, and had become an instant demanding market for beef and more beef. Before, Fort Huachucha had been the only near outlet for Ben Kane's growing herd. Now the market was limitless.

Young Andy looked back across his shoulder at the long, curving line of the trail-herd stretching behind him and his father. Vaqueros were back there in the dust, at point, and flank, and taking care of stragglers. He could hear their sharp coyote cries, and his heart swelled again.

Man to man, he recalled, his dad had talked over this venture with him before attempting it. "Son," he's said one night a month earlier, "I ain't never held anything back from you and I ain't going to start now. We've built the Double K together, you and me, and she's an up and coming spread. Fort Huachucha still wants what beef we can raise—and so does Tombstone. Rest of the ranchers here in the Valley can't supply the needs of the town."

ANDY laughed silently to himself now as he remembered that conversation. Even a kid knew why other other Sulphur Spring Valley Ranchers weren't able to feed Tombstone. Most of the men owning brands in the valley had far easier ways of making their dinero than sweating *oreanas* out of the brush. This wild southern corner of Arizona was an ideal place for anyone on the dodge to hide out until the smoke following his trail had faded away. Keeping such hombes was a profitable business. They also came in handy when scouts brought word that rich mule-trains were coming from Mexico with contrabrand and 'dobe dollars they were trying to smuggle into the States without paying border duty.

Looking ahead, Andy could see the deep notch through the big Pelancillo Hills that

had gained the name of Skeleton Canyon after one such caravan passing through it had been ambushed and massacred to the last man by renegade ranchers and their outlaw pards. They'd be riding through the canyon themselves before the day was out, and that had been the jist of his father's conversation on the memorable night.

"Son," Ben Kane had continued, "what our neighbors do is their business. What we do is ours. As you know, we've got a beef-herd made up to fill our last contract with Fort Huachucha. Won't pay us as much money as we could sell for in Tombstone, but I've given my word to the Army contractor, and I ain't never broken it yet. Howsomer, instead of banking what he pays us I'm for taking the money and riding down into Mexico and paying it out for cheap beef which we'll trail here to feed Tombstone."

Andy remembered voicing one objection: "What about our mortgage at the Tucson Federated Bank? You were going to use that government money to make a payment on it. If anything went wrong—"

His father had over-ridden that objection with a ringing laugh. "There ain't nothin' that can go wrong, son," he's said confidently. "We buy our beef, push it back here, sell on the Tombstone market and we won't have a note at the bank. The sale of one herd will wipe the slate clean, and then the Double K will be ours—lock, stock and barrel."

"What about Clyde Merton and Bate Benedict?" Andy had argued doubtfully. Merton was a beetle-browed rancher, down valley from the Double K. His herds were negligible, but he always had seemed to have more money than most valley folks. So did Bate Benedict, wispy and saturnine in his impeccable gambler's black.

"That pair won't bother us," Ben Kane said seriously. "Son, I'll tell you why. I've lived by one creed for thirty-five odd years. 'Do unto your neighbors as you'd have 'em do unto you!' Foller that rule, son, and you'll never get in trouble. I ain't never harbored any renegade rider, but I've give 'em water for their broncs, and had Windy feed 'em if they were hungry. We've set at the same table with both Merton and Bate Benedict. Their way of livin' ain't our way, but that's not our business. They know it and respect us for it. We'll have

no trouble from them, nor anyone else, and there'll be more silver on the hoof for us, boy, then they'll ever dig out of the mines back of Tombstone. Take my word for that!"

And it looked as though Ben Kane's prediction was going to prove true. Across the border, they found Mexican rancheros eager to sell from over-stocked ranges. American currency was worth a heap of 'dobe dollars and Ben's cash had quadrupled in value. Enough to buy five hundred prime steers and pay a crew of vaqueros to help drive them back across the border. Once they reached the Double K with it, the future was assured.

Andy glanced at his tall, bronzed parent, and his eyes noted the lines, overwork and worry had etched about his eyes and mouth. Well, they'd be gone soon. Andy felt his heart swell until it seemed to choke him.

AFTERNOON came, and shadows began to drift out from the Pelancillo Hills. Ben Kane gestured at the notch in the hills that was Skeleton Canyon, and grinned at Andy still riding beside him.

"Think we can make it through the Valley afore dark, son?" he queried.

Andy glanced back across his shoulder at the herd strung out behind them before answering. Faint vaquero cries drifted to him. Andy drew a deep breath and he felt something pass through him that was hard to name, but he knew suddenly and without reason that they shouldn't try and push through the Pelancillos this afternoon.

"Dad," he turned his blue eyes to his father, and scrubbed a shock of straw-hued hair back beneath the sweatband of his Stetson, "Dad, it'll be dark afore we can make home range. There's water up ahead at the mouth of Skeleton Canyon. Whyn't we hold the herd there, and move on to the Double K come mornin'?"

Ben Kane's brows cocked quizzically. "Ain't gittin' tired are you, son?" he joshed. "Why, tarnation, I figgered you'd be ra'rin' to sample one of Windy's dried apple pies. Now—"

"Now," Andy cut his father short almost fiercely, "I got no taste for pie. I jest have the feelin' that we oughtn't tuh ride the Canyon through long shadows."

"Yore tail's in the air," Ben Kane chuckled, "Ain't no reason why we

shouldn't bed down on Double K range tonight, and sleep in a real bed for a change. It's been a long time since we've sampled a feather mattress."

Andy gave up the conversation with a shrug. He had learned a long time ago that arguing with his dad was a waste of time. When Ben Kane got an idea in his head it was there for keeps—like the way he felt about Bate Benedict and Clyde Merton, and the rest of their breed.

Right ahead now, loomed the notch of Skeleton Canyon with the long shadows filling its depths, and again Andy felt that unaccountable urge to stay on this side of the Palancillos until morning.

Then they were plunging into the canyon, and busy vaqueros were pushing the herd after them. Andy lifted his eyes to the steep sidewalls of the pass. Brush and tawny boulders clung to the slopes. A hawk floated in the blue above them. Peace filled Skeleton Canyon, and Andy chuckled to himself. His tail, he guessed, was just as high as his dad had claimed. The herd was all within the jaws of the canyon now, and everything was going fine.

Ben Kane turned his flashing grin on his son. "That pie is goin' to taste mighty good for supper—"

It came then with the suddenness of thunder following a lightning bolt across the sky.

Weapons roared out their song of destruction from behind rocks and sage. Death rushing down from the rim. Andy heard the scream of a bullet close past his head but he hardly noticed it, for his eyes were staring almost stupidly at the pale flashes of muzzle flame pockmarking the slope to their right. This rushing death from the rim had come too suddenly for a man to quite comprehend what was happening. It was a nightmare, a bad dream he was having, Andy told himself, and then the dying scream of one of their vaqueros cut through him like a knife.

Careless of the lead seeking him, Andy swung in his saddle. Through risen dust he could see their riders back along the herd. Some of them were struggling to free saddle-guns and side-arms, but bullets were driving them from their saddle before they could clear a weapon. Horses, and even some cattle were falling before the cut-bank attack.

They had done nothing to deserve death! Andy felt like shouting the words aloud, and then he heard the ugly strike of lead slashing through flesh, and his father's quick gasp for breath. The sound brought Andy around, to face his father.

"Dad—" the single word fell from his lips.

Ben Kane had a Colt in his hand, but he'd never be able to fire it. Andy knew instinctively that his father would never trigger another gun, or set another saddle. He was weaving in leather now, his face ghastly gray.

"Son," he got the words out hoarsely, and blood-flecked foam seeped from his lips, "son, ride for it. Your hunch was right. Make your run for the Double K. Git Windy. Head for Tombstone, and the law. Don't shed no tears for me son. Jest take good care of yourself and the Double K—"

Andy felt the hot tears start to his eyes, but the very force of his anger burned them away before they could overflow his lids. "I won't have time to waste cryin', dad," he promised fiercely. "Not until the hombres who planned this massacre are behind bars or dead. I—"

He started to say more, but the words were a waste for they were falling on ears that could not hear them. Andy saw his father's body sag forward across the pommel of his saddle, and he knew his parent was dead. Ben Kane who'd been father and mother to a boy for fourteen long years. And now he was alone. Alone in a hell of flaming guns. The pluck of lead through the blue sleeve of his shirt jerked Andy Kane back to the full realization that death was seeking him as it had sought and found his father. Those unseen killers on the flank of the canyon had no intention of leaving any man alive to tell of this Skeleton Canyon massacre!

CHAPTER TWO

The Dead Will Ride

ANDY'S heels raked backward toward the flanks of his mount as the thought crossed his mind, but before spur steel could sink into flesh he heard once again the ugly sound of lead smashing through living tissue. The pinto beneath him seemed

to trip, and then the animal was pitching forward. Andy felt himself flung upward and lead caught him that way as he pinwheeled through air. One bullet that banded his skull with fire, and blinded his eyes to everything but a single flashing red beam of light.

Pain, such as he'd never felt before, took its place. Andy drew a gasping breath, and tasted the bitter-salt flavor of blood against his lips. Faintly, he heard the cry of voices, and then the slithering racket of horses sliding down the steep slant from the rim.

The killers who'd slaughtered Ben Kane and all their vaqueros were descending to observe their bloody handiwork. The thought was enough to force Andy's eyes open. A clump of sage loomed directly in front of him, and it was all he could see for the moment. His body felt curiously inert, but he forced himself to his hands and knees. Those cutbank killers had hidden themselves in brush. He could do the same.

"If I don't" he drove himself forward, "they'll finish the job they started, and one Kane's got to stay alive!"

Andy drew air into his lungs through skinned lips, and the clump of sage came slowly closer. Flinty soil bit at his knees and palms, but he was past caring. Life was the only thing that mattered now.

When he reached it, the clump of sage that had loomed so large was in reality pitifully small. Beyond it lay boulders, but he knew he could never crawl to them in time, for the thunder of descending hooves was growing louder by the second. A drop of blood seeping from his creased scalp struck the back of his hand. For an instant, he blinked at it stupidly, and then the sight drove some of the shocked numbness from his mind.

The killer band, whoever they were, wanted nothing but dead men left in Skeleton Canyon. "And they'll kill me quicker'n you could scotch a rattlesnake iff'n they find me alive," Andy whispered the words aloud for they seemed to have more meaning that way. "If I want to live, I got to make 'em think I'm daid."

He lifted one hand to the long gash above his right ear and it came away red with fresh gore. Andy looked at it and shuddered a little, and then anger and the grim need of the moment steadied his fingers.

Deliberately he wiped his hand across his forehead and more blood stained his palm. He smeared his face with it as he heard the nearing beat of hooves, and he knew there was nothing more he could do.

Burrowing into the brush like a cowering rabbit, he was settled and still when the first raiders swept into his range of vision.

Clyde Merton, garbed in flamboyant range finery, was the first man he could see. Low-browed, with an oily curl of black hair stringing from beneath his white Stetson, the burly Sulphur Springs rancher sat a black mount that would have cost any cowpoke a years pay. He was grinning at Bate Benedict riding near him.

"Wonder how Ben likes Hades?" he asked jovially.

Andy felt his teeth grit together, but he forced his body to remain still as his eyes touched Benedict. The gambler looked like a hungry crow waiting for bigger birds to leave their carrion prey so that he could feast on the left-overs.

Imperturbably, he answered the valley rancher. "Whether Kane is in Heaven or Hell makes little difference, amigo." The

thing that counts is that he has left this realm. He, and all of his vaqueros. Scatter out, you men," he sent his voice with sudden force across his shoulder. "Look over every hombre in this canyon, and make sure they're dead. If they ain't, put another slug in them and dab a rope to their heels. Drag them up here, we'll have a grave ready. Guns, saddles and all. Afterward we'll push their herd on, and there won't be any marks left behind to show that Ben Kane came this way."

A growling curse had come to Clyde Merton's lips. Andy listened and he felt his throat fill as the rancher spoke. "Kane's brat was along with 'em, ridin' that pet paint pony of his'n. I see his daid bronc but no sign of the kid. If he got away—"

"He didn't," Benedict's voice was imperturbable. "If you used your eyes as well as you use a Colt, you'd see the lad curled up in the brush yonder. One of you men drag him out. We'll start right here to look 'em over."

There were six of them behind their outlaw leaders, and at least two of the men looked a little sick. "Do your own dirty

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work, Benedict," one said hoarsely. "I ain't never stummicked this kind of killin'. Matchin' wits and guns with a man standin' in front of yuh is one thing. Pot shootin' 'em from the brush ain't my style."

Bate Benedict remained imperturbable. "*Bueno*," he drawled. "You may have scruples, but the gold Kane's herd will bring in Tombstone will look just as good to you as it will to us. Grab a pick'n'shovel and start digging. We'll handle the rest of it."

He touched spurs to his mount, and Andy saw the gambler's white left hand twitch the reins and swing his mount toward the brush clump where he lay. Benedict halted alongside, and Andy watched the other's right hand stray to the cuff of his left sleeve. For the space of a minute he watched the gambler study him out of eyes as black and bright as chips of obsidian, and then the other nodded.

A chuckle touched Benedict's lips as he turned back to Merton's side. "He's a dead one, Cyldé," he murmured. "Boothill bait."

And that was something Andy hadn't considered. They were going to bury his dad, and all their vaquerors right here in Skeleton Canyon. And he was going to be interred right along with them! Desperately he searched his aching mind for some answer as Merton raised his hand and gestured for his killer band to follow him.

Only the one outlaw who had defied the Tombstone gambler was left behind. He'd taken a short miner's pick and shovel from the thongs behind his saddle, and now he was going about the task of opening a trench wide and deep enough to hold men and gear. If he made a single move the other would notice it, Andy realized, and true death would come swiftly. Or would it? The thought startled him with its suddenness, and he began to study the grave-digging outlaw with new interest.

The man might be forty, Andy judged, or sixty. His face was the color of weathered teak, impassive as an Indian's. Middling tall, his shoulders were broad and powerful. Beneath the band of his Stetson, his hair showed salt-gray. Nondescript clothes covered his body. He didn't look a heap sight different, Andy realized, than any saddle-tramp whacking his way across country. And maybe that was what he'd

been until something had happened to set him riding the dark trails.

Some of the words the grave-digger had spoken came back to him. "I ain't never stummicked this kind of killin'," the man had said. "Pot shootin' 'em from the brush ain't my style—"

Andy licked his lips. He sucked a deep breath into his lungs. "Mister," he called softly, "ain't that about big enough to fit a kid my size?"

THE outlaw straightened like a man taking the kinks out of his back, and for seconds he made no other move. Then slowly he turned and through the thickening dusk his pale eyes gleamed. Andy felt every nerve in his body tighten as he watched the outlaw's hand drop with lazy speed to the butt of the Colt against his leg, and then the man chuckled softly.

"Yuh shouldn't skeer people like that, bub," he drawled. "Ain't fitten for folks to come to life so sudden. Not particularly after buzzard-beak Benedict proclaims yuh daid?"

Andy Kane felt something between a sob and a laugh come into his throat. He'd found a friend where a man might least expect it. "Do unto others—" It was his father's voice ringing in his ears.

"Yuh—yuh don't like Benedict?" Andy found his own voice surprised.

The outlaw shrugged. "I like any hombre who puts gold in my pocket," he said flatly. "Don't be forgettin' that, bub. But I also like them as give my bronc a bait of grain when he needs it. Yore dad did that when I was heading for Merton's M-in-a-Noose. If I'd a known afore the killin' started that yore dad was going to be on the receiving end I'd have stayed home. Clyde done told us there was a rich caravan comin' through the canyon tonight, and that we'd split share and share alike. I need stake money to git to California and this looked like the best way to make 'er. So here I am, but *you* ain't going to be here long—"

Andy drew a quavery breath. Relief made all of his muscles shake. He started to straighten.

"Hold 'er, bub!" the owlhooter snapped. "T'ain't quite dark enough yet for you to make a sneak. Benedict has got sharp eyes, and if he spots you, you *will* be daid!"

CHAPTER THREE

The Dark Trail

TWENTY minutes later, Andy Kane reached safety behind the ragged thumb of boulders that he'd been unable to reach after his pony dropped beneath him.

Spud Falliday had helped him from the brush after filling the end of the grave-trench he was digging with small rocks then heaping dirt over them.

"Less'n they open 'er up," he had chuckled, "they'll take my word for it, that I buried you first. Meantime you stay here behind these rocks until that Chihuahua herd you brung across the border finishes trampin' down the trench, where we'll bury the rest.

"Don't try and thank me, bub," he fixed his cold eyes on the boy. "You rate this. Spud Farraday pays his debts and I owed your dad one. But the next time we meet, if ever, don't expect any more favors. We're square."

Andy had nodded emphatically. "I'll remember," he said. Spud Farraday had saved his life in return for a nose-bag of grain, but Ben Kane was dead just the same, and he'd always treated Clyde Merton and Mate Benedict with the same courtesy he'd showed this outlaw. Thus the creed was meaningless, and yet Andy found it hard to quite believe that.

"Mebbe it can work both ways," he muttered the words aloud. "Merton and Benedict have started somethin' that's up to me to finish. They've used their guns first, but I'll see that mine talk last—"

It was dark now with nothing but a sickle moon hanging in the star-bright sky to lighten the floor of the pass. Spud Farraday's body was a black shadow against the dun shine of the canyon floor. His grave-digging was about finished, Andy judged, and then he saw Merton and Benedict returning with their crew. A taut riata stretched to a dragging burden behind each horse, and Andy felt anger creep through him. Anger hot enough to make him forget the stabbing pain in his head. They were binging in his dad and their vaqueros at rope-end.

"They'll pay for it," Andy gritted. "Pay double for every last man they bushwhacked tonight."

"Dump 'em in, boys," Bate Benedict directed. "Guns, gear, and all. Spud, what'd you do with the Kane kid?"

"He's buried good and deep," Andy heard the outlaw answer coolly. "Figgered I'd git my practice on him."

Andy breathed deeply for what seemed the first time within hours. He could see that they'd taken Spud Farraday's easy words for truth. That made him safe for now, and once he reached the Double K, old Windy Jones would be able to bandage his head and ride with him to Tombstone. The cook had been like a second father to Andy. Yes, Windy would know the next move they'd better make.

Dirt was falling now with a solid, heavy sound on bodies tumbled loosely into the trench Farraday had opened. Andy listened, and he knew he would never forget.

"Bunch that herd and roll 'em this way," Merton ordered. "We're leavin' no marks to show that Skeleton Canyon is earnin' its name tonight!"

"None save me," Andy whispered, "but they won't know that for awhile!"

THERE were lights in the small ranch-house that his dad had painted a neat white. Andy saw them as his sore feet carried him close to the Double K. Cattle were milling around the watering trough out on the flat beyond the corrals, and the sound plus the sight of lights was all the warning he needed that death was still near.

"Them devils," he whispered. "They've come straight here 'stead of running our herd down to Merton's. If they've got Windy—"

The thought pressed him cautiously toward the house. It was darker than the inside of a man's hat save for the brightness shining through the windows. He could see the shape of men moving across the panes, and hear the drunken sound of laughter as he slipped closer to the kitchen. Evidently Merton's gun-crew had found the jug Windy had kept beneath the sink.

Andy felt himself stumbling then, falling forward, and a cry that he couldn't hold back wrenched from his lips. Something had tripped him, something soft and yielding. The shock of his fall brought red lights before his eyes again, and almost blindly he twisted and pawed backward to see what his feet had struck. Hair and stubbled

skin touched his hand and through his pain, Andy saw the lumpy shape of a man.

Windy," he whispered. The old cook's body was cold to his touch. Clyde Merton or one of his gun-crew had killed the Double K cook as ruthlessly as they'd slaughtered Ben Kane and his vaqueros.

Who's out thar?" the query came from the kitchen doorway, and instinct more than conscious thought made Andy flatten out beside body of his dead friend. Through the pain that clouded his vision he saw the shape of a man start down the kitchen steps, and then Clyde Merton's bull voice called the man back.

"You're gittin' the shakes, Ike," the Sulphur Springs rancher yelled. "Ain't nothin' out thar but a stray cat or a ghost. Come on back in hyar, and have another slug of Windy's whisky. I'll say one thing for the old goat, he didn't buy rot-gut!"

Andy watched Ike turn slowly and mount the kitchen steps again, and he felt himself relax a little. He touched the old cook's face. "We'll pay 'em back for you, too, feller," he whispered.

There'd be horses out in front of the house that Merton and his gun-crew had ridden here. If he could reach them and lead one away without those inside the house hearing him, he might be able to ride into Tombstone and bring back a posse before Merton and Benedict left the Double K.

The thought was a spur that lifted Andy. He cast one last look at his friend, and Windy's body wavered and seemed to dissolve before his feverish eyes. Crazy laughter hurt his throat and Andy swayed, but there was still enough common sense left in his sick mind to make him hold back the sound. Windy's long old body was fading. Windy was a ghost now, and so was he, Andy thought. Windy had gone to join Ben Kane and make dried apple pies in Heaven, "But I'm stayin' here," Andy gritted, "until I can prove that sometimes the dead ride farther than the live ones!"

His feet felt curiously light, and the pain in his head was growing steadily worse as he stepped carefully past the corner of the house. The horses the raiders had ridden here were racked at the peeled pole rail out front. Andy searched the dark for sign of any rider they'd left to guard the

animals, but he could see none. Benedict and Merton needed no one to watch their mounts. They thought they'd killed and buried every last man in Skeleton Canyon. But they hadn't, and again he felt that uncontrollable urge to laugh, but he forced it back.

He crept into the open slowly. He caught the reins of a short-coupled brown gelding. The animal moved docilely, and Andy stepped into saddle, and he noted with some surprise that the barn looked the size of a doll's house.

"Goin daffy!" he muttered. His fumbling fingers found a lariat at the pommel and he used it to tie himself in saddle.

After that it seemed to Andy Kane that he was floating away on one of the big white clouds that sometimes played across the sky above Sulphur Springs Valley. Drifting into nothingness on a horse that moved with silent stride.

WORDS that were curiously meaningless was the first sound to come to Andy's ears. He heard them as though from a vast distance and they were spoken by a girl's voice, shrill with excitement.

"Mom," the voice was crying, "Mom, I think he's waking up. He's wigglin' around—"

Andy felt the roughness of a patch-work quilt beneath his fingers, and he managed to pry open eyes that had been closed a long time. At first the room swam before his vision, and then there was a woman with graying hair and warm brown eyes bending over him. Peeping past her was a girl with a thin, elfin face, and the same warm brown eyes. He had never seen either of them before, Andy realized, and the shock was enough to make him try and sit up.

"No," the woman said, and her hands pressed him gently back against the pillows behind his head. "You've been very sick, son, and you've got to rest now."

"Rest?" Andy spoke the word wonderingly, and his voice sounded queer in his own ears.

"Yes," the woman nodded. "You've been very sick, son—"

The girl had turned and raced from the room. Now she was back again, and a tall, gangly man with rope-burned hands and a stripling boy were coming into the bedroom with her. The man's face was craggy,

and kind-looking as the woman's. The boy's face was thin and brown and his eyes were dark as his sister's. He had never seen these people before, Andy knew, and the wonder in him grew. He watched the man's lips split wide in a friendly grin.

"Howdy, son," the stranger greeted. "Mighty nice to see you perkin' up. Doc Shannon, he was kinda afraid you might check your chips without ever wakin'—"

"Who?" Andy brought out the single word.

"Bonham's our handle, son," the big man said easily. "I'm Jeff. This here is my son, Bide. My daughter, Maria, and my wife, Hilda. We own the Four Bar."

"Where?" It seemed to Andy that about one word at a time was all he could speak.

"Nigh Tucson. We ain't more'n a whoop and holler from town, but its fer enough for hoss thieves to lift a bronc now and then. Dunno where you two got together," he chuckled, "but the hoss that brung you here was Maria's pet. Some pesky owlhooter snaked him out of our corral a month or so ago, and left us his wore-out cayuse, in exchange. Warn't no fair trade and we shore and certain didn't ever expect to see Blaze ag'in. Surprised us some when he come amblin' home with you hangin' in his saddle more dead than alive.

"Blaze brung you all by hisself, no doubt about that. The rope wrapped about yuh was all that had kept you from fallin' off somewhere along the way. Thing I can't understand is why any varmint would tie yuh to leather, 'stead of carin' for that nasty crease in your noggin'."

Andy licked lips that fever had cracked. "I done the tyin'," he answered.

"Where you from, son?" Jeff Bonham asked. "That's somethin' me'n Mom, and these two tadpoles been hankerin' to know for more'n the week you been layin' here."

Andy was about to reply when he realized he didn't know who he was. Terror caught him like a hand at his throat. He couldn't remember his past. A dark curtain had been drawn across his mind!

The Bonhams' were watching him anxiously. "Dang us, anyway," Jeff rumbled at last. "You ain't up to answerin' questions yet, son. Ma, go git a hot water bag for the younk's feet. He's shakin' like a scarecrow in the wind."

"No," Andy spoke through chattering

teeth. "I ain't cold, Mister," he felt hot boyish tears scald his cheeks, "I'm jest plain scared because I—I can't remember where I've come from. I—can't even remember my name!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Gunsmoke Partners

THE Bonhams called him Skip. It seemed as good a name as any.

"You skipped from somewhere, son," Jeff Bonham was apt to explain as weeks lengthened into months, and the months passed into a pair of years. "Some place you weren't wanted. Dunno why anybody would hanker to shoot a fine youngster like you, but there's whelps in this world who'll do most anything.

"But I'm sure," he'd add often with a confidence he didn't feel, "the time will come when you'll remember what-all happened, an' then you'll have a real handle, and the gun-savvy to go back home and pay off the hombres who laced that bullet across your skull.

Meantime this is your home, and don't yuh ever think different. The Four Bar can use a good hand, and you got the build and savvy to make one. Bide, he needs a side-kick, and Mom, her heart's big enough to hold you along with the rest of us. Maria, now, she's a little divil, and if you paddle her bottom once in awhile it'll do her good!"

Thus he had been accepted by the Bonhams, and save for that dark curtain separating him from his past, Andy knew that he could ask for no more happiness than he was finding here.

The work was good and there were pay-days spent in Tucson with dark-faced, grinning Bide. There were barn dances, and neighborhood shindigs where he could hold in his arms a Maria who had grown astonishingly lovely.

And best of all there were late afternoons after the chores were done when graying Jeff Bonham coached his son and Andy in the art of gun-play. For before he'd bought the Four Bar, Jeff had been a frontier marshal bringing law to Kansas cow-towns and Montana gold camps.

Then one memorable afternoon when nineteen was fading into twenty and they

were practicing in the cut-bank wash out behind the barn, a man in the well-cut clothes of a merchant or banker had come riding around the barn to watch them.

For a time he'd held his tongue and Jeff had given him only a passing glance before returning his attention to Bide and Andy. "Boys," he'd voiced his favorite theme, "you cain't never learn enough when it comes to handlin' Colts. No matter how fast you git there's always some hombre jest a little bit quicker on the draw. You may never face another man over gunsights, but if yuh do, I want you to be the fust to shuck lead."

"My sentiments!" the watcher from the corner of the barn said dryly. "You're Mr. Bonham?" he added.

Andy and Bide swung with Jeff to face the stranger, and Andy was conscious suddenly of the streaking white scar that marked his forehead above the right eye. All their friends and neighbors, of course, knew the stoy of how he had come to Four Bar with a gaping scalp wound banding his skull. They knew the past was a blank to the young man called 'Skip', and so it was all right. But he'd never overcome his feeling of self-consciousness in the presence of strangers.

He started to turn away but Bide grabbed his arm. "Lets see what this hombre wants," he murmured.

"Bonham, that's me," Jeff answered the stranger courteously. "What can I do for you, sir?"

A gold badge flashed in the stranger's hand. He tossed it through the air, and Jeff Bonham automatically reached out and caught the emblem. "City Marshal, Tombstone," he read the words that were embossed on the metal.

"Bonham," the stranger said in crisp, quiet tones, "my name is Cliff Jenson. I am Cashier of the Tombstone National Bank, and I was empowered by a Citizens Committee to come here and offer you the post of City Marshal. We need a man of your caliber and reputation to fill the job, and I imagine five hundred a month, plus fifty percent of fines might be an added inducement."

Andy watched Jeff Bonham look down almost contemptuously at the star in his hand, and then the ex-lawman's eyes rose to meet Cliff Jenson.

"I gave my share of years to gunsmoke," he said quietly, "and I figger I'm lucky to be alive. There's always a man faster'n you. I got two of 'em right here," his gesture included Andy and Bide. These young ones are slicker'n a pair of greased cats. So, fer as I'm concerned, my days of gunnin' are over. I'm doin' right nicely, thankee."

"But we need you!" Jenson's words came explosively. "Tombstone is four years old. Our population is still growing, and we are without a marshal. The last man to take the job is in boothill, I'll admit. He bucked a man named Bate Benedict—"

"Bate Benedict—" Andy spoke the words wonderingly, and they were like a sudden bell tolling inside his head, like a sharp needle thrust into his brain. He put his hand to his head, and started at a stumbling run toward the ranchhouse.

Following, Bide found him stretched on the double bed they shared in an upstairs room of the big house. The young rancher was tall, bronzed as an Apache, and with hair as dark. He looked down at blond Andy Kane lying on the bed, and he noticed that the streaking scar above his companion's ear had turned red with a sudden rush of blood. For years they'd been as close as brother's could be, and yet now it seemed to Bide that he was looking into the face of a stranger. A tortured, twisted face that had once seen Hell and was now re-living it.

"Skip," Bid called Andy by the only name he knew, "Skip, what in Tophet hit you, fella?" You—you look like a man seein' ghosts—"

Andy laughed, and the sound was unnatural in his ears. "Ghosts?" he spoke the word harshly, "Pardner, I've been one myself, but now I think I'm comin' back to life!"

IN PHRASES that were short and jerky, he recalled that long-gone night of horror when murder had again stained the sandy gut of Skeleton Canyon. Jeff Bonham, his wife, and Maria had come into the room but Andy was hardly aware of their presence.

"I was just a kid, sixteen," he told them. "The world was bright, like a new dollar. Me'n dad were bringing up a herd from Mexico to stock the Double K and feed

Tombstone. I remember not wantin' to tackle Skeleton Canyon that night, but dad was set on making it through to our range.

"We didn't get there. Cut bank killers waylaid us. They nailed every man in our crew save me. Some of it is still kinda hazy, but I kinda recollect 'em diggin' a trench and buryin' all of our outfit. Then they ran the herd over the grave to wipe out the traces of what they'd done. The names of the two king-pin killers were *Bate Benedict*, a skinny, crow-beaked little gambler and *Clyde Merton*, a rancher, ownin' a no-good outlaw spread nigh the Double K."

Jeff Bonham nodded gravely. "Sometimes hearin' a name or visitin' a familiar spot will make a feller whose lost his memory snap right back tuh normal. Guess its done that for you—"

"*Andy Kane!*" Andy murmured his own name almost wonderingly. "Not Skip. I'm Andy Kane, and there's going to be some folks who'll hear that name mighty soon."

Maria Bonham had pushed to the side of the bed. She caught at Andy's slim brown hands as he swung his booted feet to the floor. "Skip," she still used the name they'd given him, "Skip, what are you going to do?"

Andy looked down at the girl, and he was aware of her tall slenderness molded beneath the calico of her dress. Of her brown hair, framing an oval face. Of red lips, softly parted. She was all that a man could ever want, all he had ever wanted, Andy realized. But he couldn't claim Maria Bonham until a gunsmoke debt was paid.

"Do?" Harsh, brittle laughter touched his lips. "Why, I'm headin' for Tombstone

soon as I can saddle my bronc. What else can I do?"

"You can stay right here, Andy Kane," the girl answered him quietly. "There's everything here you can ever want."

"Everything," Andy told the girl softly, "but honor. A man pays his debts. 'I've got a score to settle in Tombstone—then I'll be back.'"

"I'm ridin' with you," Bide said explosively. "You're going to need a gun-smoke pard!"

THE years had dulled the white paint on walls and doors. The roofline of the ranchhouse sagged. Rails had dropped from the corrals.

Andy gentled his brown mare, Chiquita in the yard. "This is it, Bide," he said quietly, and the words tasted gritty against his lips. "Bright as a new dollar, once upon a time. Now there ain't a head of stock on our range, and not much left here."

"We'll change all that," Bide Bonham said softly.

"Yes," Andy said somberly, "after we visit Tombstone."

Bide agreed with a nod, and Andy was grateful for the other's understanding. There wasn't much a man could say after one look at all this desolation.

But there was no desolation in Tombstone. That Arizona silver camp was booming loud and long. Andy listened to the mingled sounds that came to them as they paused at the head of Allen Street, and it was enough to make a man shake his head. Heavy ore-wagons plowed through hock deep dust, carrying their loads toward the growling stamp mills that lay along the San Pedro river to westward. Solid brick

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business houses rose alongside saloons and dancehalls. The street was crowded. Andy watched ladies of the evening brush elbows with Eastern capitalists on the board walks that banded Allen. Horses and light wagons lined curb-side hitch rails.

"So this," Bide Bonham said on a deep drawn breath, "is Tombstone! Looks like the whole danged World has come here to grab a slice of silver. Pard, lets go wet our whistles, keep our ears open, and our mouths shut. Might be we'll get a line on your friends, Benedict and Merton."

Andy nodded. He let Chiquita pick her way along the street, and words of caution Jeff Bonham had offered them as they'd left the Four Bar came back to him. "Walk light, son, until you git the lay of the land. Remember, Benedict is one of the town bosses. More'n likely Merton is too, and you can't go accusin' 'em of killin's four years gone, without some proof that'll put the law on your side."

Bide brought him from his abstraction with a gesture toward the broad facade of a saloon that shouldered the boardwalk. Behind its window lights were sparkling, for dusk had followed them into town.

"The Silverado Palace," Bonham read the sign above the swinging doors. "Bate Benedict, Proprietor. Amigo, this looks like the right place to get acquainted!"

Andy nodded and he felt tightness gathering in him as they wedged their mounts into openings at the crowded hitch-rail and climbed down. He slapped trail dust from his Stetson and was covertly pleased at the disinterest porch loungers showed in them. Strangers were common in Tombstone these days, and that might make their task easier. Yet a raging impatience to settle his score filled him, too, for brown eyes on the Four Bar were calling.

With Bide beside him, Andy climbed to porch level and pushed through the swing doors. *Bate Benedict!* The name was like a brand burned in his mind.

Andy spotted the wizened gambler immediately. Benedict was standing at the far end of the long bar across the room from them. Impeccable in fine broadcloth and white linen, Benedict's black eyes watched the crowd through a curtain of smoke that rose from the long cheroot tucked in a corner of his wide, thin mouth.

The bar was crowded with muckers off the afternoon shift, but Andy hardly saw them. He moved across the sawdust covered floor on legs that felt light. He brushed the black-handled Colt low on his right thigh, and the butt of the gun seemed warm and eager to his touch. It would be easy, he thought to lift the weapon from leather, and drive lead into Bate Benedict's body. Then common sense cooled his hatred. They'd never live to reach the door if he shot the gambler here in his own saloon.

Andy slid into the bar beside Benedict, and the gambler stepped back a pace to accomodate them. "Evening gentlemen," he murmured courteously, and Andy saw a puzzled expression cross the man's narrow, lined face. "You look like strangers," he added, "and it is our custom to welcome same by setting up the first drink. Name your liquor, gentlemen."

Remembering that look he'd surprised on the other's face, Andy nodded. "We're from over Tucson way," he drawled. "Came to hunt an old friend of my dad's who used to live in this neighborhood."

"And who might he be?"

"Kane," Andy said deliberately, and his gray eyes flicked Benedict. "Ben Kane."

CHAPTER FIVE

Tombstone Gun-trap

FOR the space of ten heartbeats, the gambler seemed to freeze, then his white hand rose steadily to draw the cigar from his mouth. "Kane?" his brows drew together. "Yes, I remember that name. He lived here some years back, then moved down across the border. Had a little two-bit spread out in Sulphur Springs Valley that he sold to a friend of mine, Clyde Merton. He ain't been seen around these parts in years, but Clyde might know where he's located. Yuh can ask him, if you get the chance. I say that because he's a right busy gent. A Citizens Committee just named him marshal."

Andy picked up the glass that had been set before him. His hand was steady as the gambler's. So Clyde Merton was the new Law in Tombstone. He downed the drink, and felt it spread like hot fire. The odds had been heavy before. Now they were piling higher.

"Thanks," he put the glass down carefully. "Mebbe we'll see him around this evening. We ain't in no particular hurry. This looks like a town where a man can kick his heels."

"My tables are square," Benedict said quietly, "and my liquor is the best. Enjoy yourselves, gentlemen. It's been a pleasure to meet you!"

Andy watched the wispy gambler turn and move toward a door at the back of the room, then his chilly eyes touched Bonham.

Bide was breathing heavily. "Lord," he murmured. "I feel like a steer's tromped me. Dang my dad, anyway. He should of took that blasted marshal's job himself. Now—"

"Now," Andy answered and his thoughts were running fast, "we've got to see Cliff Jenson. He represents the decent element in this town, and we've got to have them behind us. Right now the toughs are ridin' high with Benedict and Merton in the saddle. But mebbe we can blow 'em out. Let's mosey, I got ideas."

There were lights glowing behind the steel-barred windows of the Tombstone National Bank building. At the livery stable where they'd left their horses, Andy had queried the old hostler concerning the bank cashier.

"He's a right-thinkin', hard-workin' feller," the stableman had told them. "Better'n some you'll find around Tombstone. So if it's a job you're lookin' for he'll know where you can find one."

The front door of the bank was open. Andy climbed the steps and pushed inside. The remembered shape of Jenson loomed behind a square desk across a railed counter. He looked up and rose to his feet as Andy and Bide crossed the floor.

A smile crossed the man's square-jawed face as he recognized the approaching pair. "Why, you're the two lads who were with Mr. Bonham the afternoon I offered him the post of City Marshal." His direct eyes turned full on Andy. "And you're the one who, shall I say, acted a little queerly when I mentioned the name of Bate Benedict. I've been wondering ever since what that might have meant to you."

Andy chuckled, and the sound was dry in the emptiness of the big room. "I'll tell you," he said flatly. "It meant remembering a name I haven't heard since I was sixteen."

In crisp phrases, he told the banker the story of the Skeleton Canyon massacre, and of a long, narrow grave that the feet of men and the hooves of countless cattle and horses had been treading for four years and more.

"That's the most amazing yarn I've ever heard," Cliff Jenson told them honestly. "Our bank," he added, "took over the mortgage on your Double K from the Tucson National after Clyde Merton and Benedict spread the word around town that your dad had pulled stakes and decided to settle in Mexico. Merton leased your place from us at first, then bought it. But we'll certainly help you recover the property if the murders you speak of can be proven—and I hope to God they can!"

"Tombstone," he went on warmly, "has been remotely respectable until recently. Merton's gun-toughs and Benedict's tin-horns have worked more or less behind the scenes up until now. But they had enough of their henchmen planted in our Citizens Committee to name Merton our new marshal after your father refused the appointment. And now that he has the post, the handwriting is plain. Last night two prospectors owning claims in the Silver Hills were killed in Benedict's place. Another man was shot to death on Allen Street. Soon it won't be safe for an honest man to leave his home after dark."

Andy listened attentively to the banker, realizing that now was the time to mention the plan that had come into his mind since meeting Benedict.

"Mebbe," he said quietly, "we can nip their show in the bud. If you'll round up a bunch of the decent citizens I'll show them a grave in Skeleton Canyon, that will speak for itself. We'll let the dead put their noose around Merton's and Benedict's neck."

The banker's fist had clenched on the counter. His eyes were glowing with excitement. "We'll do it!" he exclaimed. "If what you say is true the courts cannot fail to bring indictments against them. Kane, I'll have a dozen prominent citizens assembled at the end of Toughnut Street within an hour. Get your horses and meet us there."

Bide Bonham spoke for the first time. "Better be sure they can handle guns," he said dryly. "Merton might get wind of our plans, and we don't want any more graves dug in Skeleton Canyon!"

ANDY was silent as they reached street level and turned back toward the livery a block distant. Light from the many saloons splashed the boardwalk. This was the town Double K beef had been going to feed, and might feed yet, he thought with growing excitement.

The years fell away and he felt for a moment like the eager boy who had seen the world as a bright silver dollar, and then a gun-flash, red against the dark, swiveled his eyes to an alley across street from them. Walking next to the curb, Andy felt the pluck of lead through the crown of his hat, and he heard a man yell from somewhere up in front of them.

Again the gun howled and a bullet ricocheted from the hitch-rail at his elbow. Andy lifted his Colt from leather and flung forward and down into the street dust. He flicked a quick shot toward the alley and heard Bibe's gun echo it. Lead sprayed dust across his face, and then a man screamed hoarsely and came lurching from the alley, hands clasped across his middle. Andy watched the killer's Colt fall from weakening fingers, and then his body doubled forward, half-on, half-off the boardwalk.

The livery stable was no more than a hundred feet away. Andy pushed himself to his feet. Bide was up beside him, teeth flashing whitely in his dark face.

"First blood," he grinned. "Pard, it looks like somebody has got a good memory!"

People attracted by the shots were tumbling from saloons and honky-tonks. Andy hesitated "If that crowd holds us up Merton will see that we land in his jail," he told Bonham. "And runnin' will make us look guilty as hell—"

"But it will beat bein' daid," Bide answered. "Let raise some dust, mister!"

They had passed a pair of saddle horses in front of a house not far behind them, Andy remembered. He swung back along the walk at a run. A gun howled from the crowd, and a voice yelled: "Thar they go. Haid 'em off, somebody. These killin's have got to stop!"

Panting, Andy jerked free the tie-rope on one of the two horses he'd seen. Bide had the other. They swung up together, and Bide was laughing.

"Hoss stealin' and killin'," he called.

"T'ain't a bad beginning for two country boys."

Andy rammed spurs into the black beneath him. Twisting, he sent high shots above the heads of the following crowd and chuckled silently as he watched them dive for the protection of buildings on either side.

Town lights faded behind them as they reached the open country and Andy saw that all laughter had faded from Bide's dark face.

"So now we're on the dodge," Bide said bleakly. "Bullet bait for any gent in the hills. You can bet Merton and Benedict will see to it that there's bounty put on our heads before morning."

Andy gentled the black to a standstill as Bide voiced his thoughts, and his own face was grim. "There ain't going to be any tomorrow to worry about," he said quietly, "unless we're lucky tonight. Outlaws on the dodge, don't stand much chance in court."

He swung his arm toward the east where a late-rising moon silhouetted dark hills. "Those are the Pelancillos, Bide. Skeleton Canyon cuts through 'em. Right now there's a posse formin' behind us, and I aim to see they follow us. Our only chance now is to show them the grave where my dad and the rest of our vaqueros lie buried. I'm bankin' on Jenson joining that bunch behind us. If he sticks with them we've got a chance—"

"To deliver a grave-full of dead men," Bide echoed.

THEY scouted a prospector's glory hole on the way to the Pelancillo's and borrowed a short-handed pick and shovel. Riding again, in the light of the moon that had risen above the Pelancillos, Andy Kane saw the dark blotch of horsemen on the shining plain behind them. The riders were a few miles away, but they were coming on fast, following the trail he and Bide had purposefully left to guide them.

"They'll know where we're heading now," he told Bide, "so its time to see if these broncs can run. We've got to make the canyon with time to find dad's grave."

They pushed across a corner of Double K range, and Andy's face contorted involuntarily as the V gap of Skeleton Canyon loomed darkly against the dull shine of the

hills. Hills that were like a mirror, calling back remembered days when a happy youngster had hazed *oreanas* out of the brush at the heels of his hard-riding father. Those had been days when a boy could dream, and a man could look ahead to an untroubled future. But now Ben Kane was dead, and so were all of his vaqueros, and so was the boy who had thought the world was a bright silver dollar. But he could make those good times come again, Andy reminded himself, as a memory picture of Marie Bonham came before his eyes.

Then he forgot the girl for the dark mouth of Skeleton Canyon was right in front of them now, and he could hear again the ghostly sound of a phantom herd that once had come this way to the Double K.

"How far we got to travel?" Bide yelled.

"Two miles, mebbe three," Andy told him and his eyes were already searching out landmarks. "We've got to find ourselves a nest of boulders that poke out like a sore thumb from the side of the canyon. I remember hidin' in 'em while Benedict's crew buried dad and our men."

CHAPTER SIX

The Dead Rise

THE walls rushed past them on either side, crooked bend following bend, and the past came rushing back vividly as they travelled. Andy found himself living once again that horrible night. Then, as they rounded another bend, he saw the cluster of boulders that reminded him of a swollen thumb.

He felt his breath catch in his throat. "There she is, Bide," he said with calmness that was hard to keep. "The rocks where I hid like a scared rabbit while Benedict and Merton buried dad and the rest."

"They won't be very deep and its a good thing," Bide Bonham said as he swung down with the pick he'd been carrying across the saddle-bows. "That posse ain't going to be far behind us, and if Merton and Benedict are with them they're going to be far behind us, and if Merton and

Benedict are with them they're going to do some shooting before we get a chance to do any talking."

Andy nodded. "We've got to hit the right spot first off" he said grimly. "One hole is going to be our limit."

He touched his shovel to the sandy bottom of the canyon as he spoke. "Sink that pick right here, amigo."

Bide wasted no words. In moonlight that made the shadows dance, his pick grated. Andy shoveled debris from the slowly deepening trench and prayed that time would side them in slowing the approach of the Tombstone posse.

"I've hit something," Bibe Bonham's voice shook the silence. A bit of leather clung to the point of his pick as he raised it. "Saddle leather," he said grimly, and the next sweep of the pick dislodged a mouldering tree with stirrups clinging to it. He flung the saddle aside, and there were bones beneath. Animal mixed with human.

Andy straightened, and stepped from the trench. His face was gray and lined. "That's enough for now," he said. "If Tombstone needs any more proof we'll dig deeper, but I'm hopin' it won't. Seems like a shame to disturb men who've been resting here four years!"

"They're coming in," Bide snapped, and his hand dropped to the Colt on his thigh. "This is it, Skip," he involuntarily used Andy's Four Bar name.

"No," Andy said, and he moved toward the cluster of rocks that arced into the canyon. "This ain't it. I hid out once and prayed for a gun. Now we're going to hide out again and this time we've got guns!"

The muted thunder of approaching hooves filled the canyon with echoes now. Sound that was almost like the whispering of dead men. Andy felt sweat trickle down between his bushy eyebrows, and he wiped it from his nose irritably.

"Keep a rein on yourself, pard," Bide muttered understandingly. "Sometimes the dead have got to ride a long ways, but they always come back. And this time its for keeps. We—" he broke off for horsemen were sweeping into view.

Don't Stop Now—

BUY MORE BONDS!

Andy watched them come, two by two, and he counted twenty straightening out along the canyon floor. He recognized Bate Benedict, and Clyde Merton's stocky shape leading the posse. Moonlight glazed the rifles they were carrying across saddlebows. His eyes probed the rest of the line, and then he sighed involuntarily as he made out Cliff Jenson's tall, solid body right behind Merton.

"Jenson joined them," he said softly.

"If he's got the right men with him," Bide murmured, "we ain't goin' to have to worry about facing a judge. Watch 'em, and keep your gun in your hand."

Andy laughed, but there was no mirth in the sound. He'd had his Colt waiting this hour for a long time.

Benedict and Merton were the first to see the hummock of fresh earth scarring the smooth bottom of the gorge, and Andy saw them swerve their mounts. For an instant he was afraid they might try and ride on without viewing the trench, and then Cliff Jenson lifted his arm.

"Hold up," his voice boomed back over the Tombstone posse. "Here's something that's worth looking into."

Merton and Benedict swung their mounts as the rest of the posse bunched up about the open trench. "Tain't nothin' but a mess of old bones the coyotes dug up," Andy heard Benedict say.

Cliff Jenson answered him, and the cashier's voice was level and a little sarcastic. "Ever seen coyotes use a pick and shovel?" he asked. "I see both laying alongside that hole."

"It's a grave!" someone in the posse ejaculated. "Who'd ever pick this spot to do their buryin'?"

Some of the riders were down by the time the speaker had finished. "They's hoss bones and saddle-gear in here," one said excitedly.

Another grabbed up the shovel. "Let's do some more diggin'," he suggested. "Mebbe we'll find out what happened—"

"You won't find nothing," Bate Benedict's voice was rising like the whine of a coyote baying the moon. "Are you gents forgetting we come out here trailing that pair of young whelps who breezed into town this afternoon. They killed one of our citizens, and I'm going to see them hang for it!"

"Maybe," Cliff Jenson said, "we might learn a lot about them by staying right here."

Andy watched Clyde Merton slip a Colt stealthily from leather. The new Tombstone marshal spoke, and his voice was deceptively quiet. "You seem to know a lot about that pair, Jenson. How come?"

They were going to murder the cashier, and all the men he'd brought with him, Andy realized, for he could see Benedict's crew sliding in behind their boss. Skeleton Canyon might once again hide its own dead, and he found himself rising as the thought crossed his mind.

"I'll tell you how come, Merton," he said, and his voice was like a quick rush of wind that swayed all the men around to face the cluster of boulders.

Bate Benedict was one of the first to spot Andy's tall shape as he rose. "Kane!" the little gambler rasped. "By Heaven I knew you were a man I'd seen before when yuh walked into the Silverado this afternoon. I never forget a face!"

"But the last time you saw mine was in the moonlight like now," Andy mocked.

"Ben Kane," an oldtimer in the posse gasped. "Ye're either him or his ghost."

"Neither," Andy rasped, and he stepped deliberately from behind the boulders with Bide pacing beside him. "I'm just his son, grown up a mite and back to settle a score for my dad. Tell the folks what happened that night four years ago, Benedict!"

"I don't know what you're talking about," the gambler snapped, and Andy realized that the gambler was stalling for time.

Stalling desperately in an effort to get his own henchmen into position so they could rake Jenson's committee with a lethal cross-fire.

"Bide," Andy said, and his voice was cold as the white bones in the long grave, "step away from me, and keep an eye on Merton. Shoot to kill!"

"Hell, I don't even know what this is all about," the low-browed marshal growled. "You two gents are guilty of a killin', and I'm going to take you back to Tombstone alive, or daid!"

Andy chuckled. "Dead, preferably, eh Clyde? And this time you'll make sure. You slipped up the first time because

you didn't see my carcass tumbled in alongside my dad. You missed there too, because I misdoubt if any of your killer crew took the time to strip off his belt and guns before buryin' him along with the rest. Ben Kane's Colts are still in the grave you dug for him, and his name is inlaid on both of 'em. They'll be enough proof to show who was buried here."

"You're lying," Benedict cried. "His guns weren't marked. I got 'em—" And then he halted, seeming to realize for the first time how his own tongue had trapped him.

"Damned fool!" Clyde Merton's short temper snapped as he squalled the words, and his own Colt was rising from leather to swing toward his cut-back partner.

Andy lifted his Colt, and he seemed to be remembering the lesson Jeff Bonham had drilled into him and Bide. "You may never face another man over gunsights but if yuh do I want you to be the fust to shuck lead—. His first bullet caught Merton in the middle and bent him forward like a half empty potato sack across the nub of his saddle.

Bate Benedict's hand were flipping derringers from his sleeves. "Gun 'em all!" he was crying. "We'll fill this canyon with dead men!"

"Not tonight," Bide Bonham drawled. "My daddy taught me to shoot fust," and

his Colt was thundering an obbliggato to his words.

Andy saw Bate Benedict rise in his stirrups arms flapping like a pair of stiff wings, and his horse reared and whirled, and the gambler flopped sidewise from his saddle.

It was over before the gun echoes faded, and Cliff Jenson looked down a little dazedly at the shapes of two dead men on the canyon floor. "Merton—" he choked.

Andy stared toward the spot where the marshal had fallen from his saddle, and he felt his own throat tighten for Clyde Merton was lying in the grave they'd opened. Lying with the bones of good men he'd helped murder.

"Mebbe," Andy said, "we'd best just let him lay. The boys down in Hell will appreciate it!"

"And so will Maria," Bide Bonham's soft tones were for Andy Kane's ears alone. "We'd best be getting back to the Four Bar, Skip. I promised her I'd bring you back fast as hosses could make it, once we finished here."

Andy looked at his partner, and he felt his chest swell with a lightness he'd never expected to feel again. He glanced toward the rimrock and back to watching faces, and a smile was on his lips suddenly.

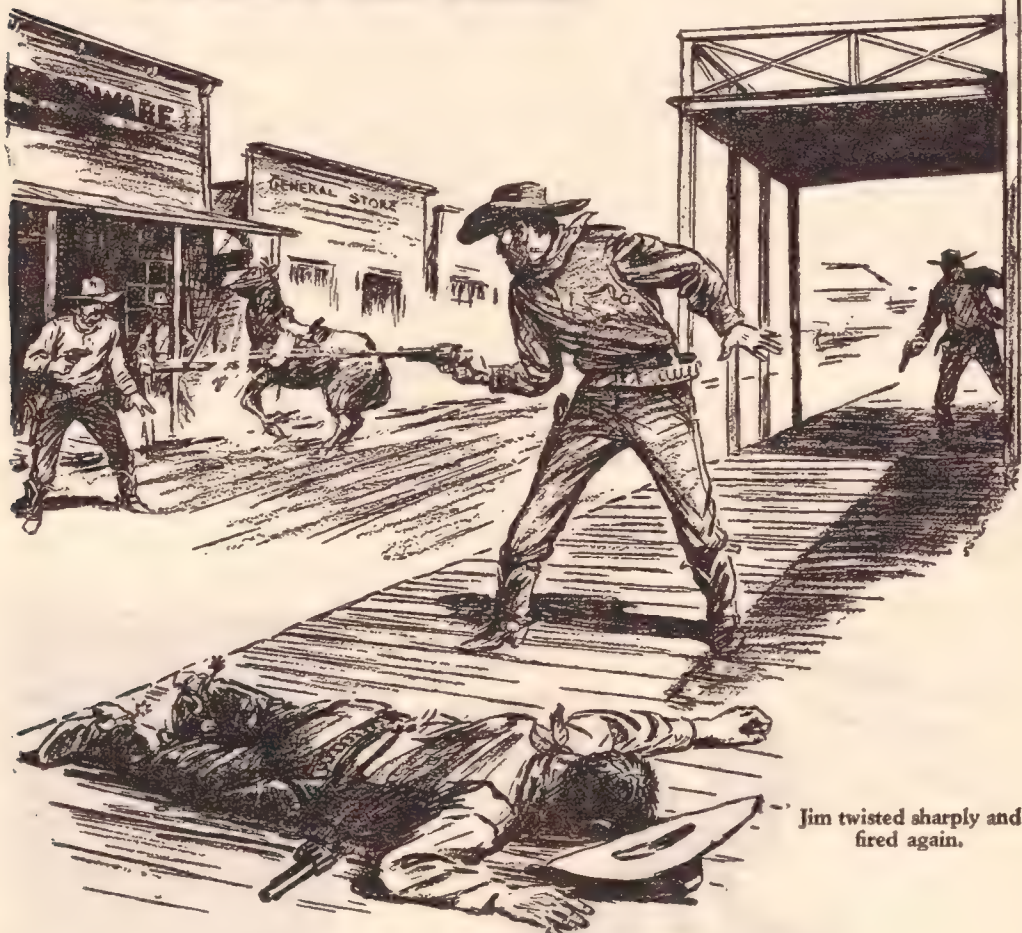
"Bright as a new silver dollar," he murmured. "Yes sir, bright as a new dollar—"

THE END



Redden Rides the Death-Watch

It was a neat bushwhack trap that Jim Redden was about to witness. . . . One that would eliminate forever the man who had made Jim's life a hell-on-earth. . . . But for one brief moment, the drifting buckaroo realized that it took more than the lead of a blazing sixgun to erase a lifetime of bitter memories.



Jim twisted sharply and fired again.

By Wayne D. Overholser

IT WAS too much for Jim Redden to expect. He hadn't counted on it, or so he told himself as he stood in front of the public stable, on Stone Saddle's sun-brightened Main Street. Yet he felt a vague sense

of disappointment, for this was Saturday, the logical day for Nola to be in town. He knew he would recognize Nola Craig. Many things would change in three years, but he was sure Nola would be as beautiful as the

last time he had seen her. He could never forget her graceful walk, her slim, perfect figure.

Then, as always, there was the knowledge that brought the dull ache to him just as it had for three years. She was not Nola Craig now. She was Nola Stacey, married to Verd Stacey.

For a long time Jim stood in front of the stable, the hard August sun upon him, watching the never-still Saturday afternoon shopping crowd, listening to the blurred talk as ranchers drifted along the board walk, eyeing closely each group of riders that went by. He was a tall man, dark eyes made bitter by three years of hate, his long face masked by an untrimmed beard, looking the part of a saddle bum, which was exactly what he was.

Jim didn't know what he'd do if he saw Nola. Nor did he know what he'd do if he saw Verd Stacey. During three years of aimless drifting his one thought was that eventual meeting. He had decided to go up to Stacey and ask him why he'd married Nola, giving him the choice of grabbing his gun, or dying with it in holster. But it had taken him three years to get here to Stone Saddle, and now that he was here, he wasn't at all sure he'd do what he'd planned.

There were but two things he was certain of: He loved Nola, and hated Verd Stacey. Now, if Nola were suddenly to appear along the crowded street, he might take his look, and if she appeared happy, he'd drift on. If Stacey appeared. . .! Without conscious thought, Jim's hand dropped to his gun.

Three men moved along the boardwalk in front of Jim. One of them was saying, "I'm sure done playing with that Stacey pup. I hope he's in town. If he is. . ."

They were past then, words coming back to him in an unintelligible roll of sound. The man who had spoken was a lanky, string-muscle gunslick who carried two Colts in the manner of one who knows well their use. Jim stared after them until they were lost from sight, a new and grim satisfaction within him. Stacey had his troubles. What they were made little difference. The lanky man had the look of a tough hand, and Verd Stacey wasn't, according to Jim's way of thinking, a tough man at all. Handsome, smart with women and race horses, and crooked, but he wasn't tough.

HERE it was, all laid out in a pattern Jim had not expected. He saw what he had to do, and the playing of his hand would give him an inward warmth he had not felt for three years. He'd stay in Stone Saddle, maybe get a job with some outfit close by, and let the lanky man take care of Stacey. Then, when Nola was a widow, Jim would call on her and extend his sympathy.

There was a smile on Jim Redden's lips as he moved down the boardwalk. Here was a grim drama that would be played out before him. He had had his revenge at the hand of another man. It was a play he could watch, and when it was done, he would not be placed in a position where Nola would hate him. She would turn to him, and this time Jim would not lose her.

Jim stepped into the Eagle Bar for a drink, bought a cigar, and stood for a time at the bar, idly watching a poker game, the cigar clamped in one corner of his mouth, all the time keeping half an eye on the batwings. He heard the barkeep ask, "How's things, Link?"

"Purty good right now. If Verd can keep that damned ornery Morg McKane off his neck for a week, he'll clean up."

Slowly Jim turned, and had his look. The barkeep was talking to a pink-cheeked oldster who was, Jim guessed, one of Stacey's men.

"He's cleaned up two years in a row now," the barkeep said. "Before he hit this country, Morg's horse was winning mighty regular, but I reckon it'll be Verd's year again. I'm putting all the dinero I can raise on Blueboy."

"Morg ain't got a horse that can beat Blueboy," the oldster said heavily, "and that gunslinging son knows it. That's why he's trying to kick up a ruckus. Verd's in town, and if Morg's here, they'll tangle, sure as hell's hot. I tried to make Verd stay home, but Nola's coming in on the stage, and he was bound to meet her."

The barkeep swore softly. "Morg's fixing to make a widow out of that girl, but I don't see what it'll get him. Blueboy can still win the race."

The oldster shook his head. "Nobody can ride that horse but Verd. Morg knows it. That's why he's gonna beef Verd one way or another."

"Then mebbe I'd better not do any big betting. You know, Link, I heard Morg

was offering to meet any even money he could find. Looked funny to me when I heard it, after the way Blueboy's come in the last two years." The barkeep scratched his chin thoughtfully. "Why don't Verd keep Blueboy out of the race? Whatever he makes won't pay for getting filled full of lead."

"Verd ain't yella," the oldster snapped.

"It's all the way you look at it." The barkeep shrugged, and moved away.

The oldster remained at the bar, worrying his drink with his fingertips as he stared at it. Jim knew what was in the man's mind. He was trying to think of some way to hold Stacey and Morg McKane apart, and he wasn't having any luck. There was in Jim, then, a reluctant admiration for Stacey that he could hold a loyalty such as there was in this oldster, a loyalty such as Jim Redden had never known in any man. Nor, he thought bitterly, in any woman.

FOR a long time Jim didn't move. They were hard moments for him. By nature he was a fair man, but three years of hate had corroded his soul. To him Verd Stacey had been everything that was evil in a man, but now he was seeing Stacey in a new light. The man had courage, or he wouldn't have come to town today. Suddenly Jim realized that when Stacey died at the hand of Morg McKane, there would be no satisfaction for Jim Redden in his dying. If Nola loved Stacey as he loved her, no man, Jim Redden or anybody else, would ever fill his place in her heart.

Jim was still standing at the bar when Morg McKane and his two henchmen came in. They came directly to the oldster, McKane in the middle, a bony-faced man who looked the part he was playing. The man on McKane's left was stocky with a long, drooping mustache, the other taller with a saber-sharp nose and a cruel, lipless mouth. The evil that was in these three was a sharp and tangible stench in Jim's nostrils. He thought, as he watched them bear down upon the Stacey man, that there was no honor in letting them do the job he had told himself for three years that it was his job to do.

"Link," McKane asked, "is Stacey in town?"

"That," the oldster snarled, "is none of your damned business."

McKane laughed softly. "Then I reckon he is. You tell him he's ducked a fight with me too many times. Today it's either pull his iron when he sees me, or he'll tuck his tail and run. Tell him that, Link. I've been all over town looking for him, and he's nowhere to be seen. I know he's hiding, and I know he's yella. Before the day's over, the whole town will know he's yella."

"And they'll know you're cooking up a ruckus for no reason at all," Link snapped, "except that you know his Blueboy can beat any horse you've got long as Verd's topping him, so you figger to win the race by beefing Verd."

"That ain't it at all," McKane spluttered. "I've never liked him, and I'm saying he made young Lafferty shoot himself when he poked him out of the last nickel he had."

"Which is a damned lie," Link said quickly. "You was the one that cleaned Lafferty the week before. He'd borrowed fifty dollars, trying to pick up what he'd lost to you. That's all Verd took off him, and he wouldn't have took that if he'd knowed how broke the kid was."

"So I'm a liar," McKane said softly, stepping back. "I don't take that from anybody."

LINK carried a gun, but he'd be less of a match for McKane than Verd Stacey. Likely it was part of McKane's game to whittle Stacey down by getting Link first.

"I don't know much about this shooting shebang you're cooking up, McKane," Jim cut in as he moved away from the bar, the cold cigar still tucked into one corner of his mouth, "but I don't like the idea of a gun-slick egging an old timer like this gent into a fight. Count me in if you're aiming to push it."

McKane whirled to face Jim, sharp amazement running across his bony face. He asked, "Who in hell are you?"

"Just a buckaroo drifting through," Jim answered, and mentally cursed himself for acting on impulse.

"You won't be drifting much farther if you figger on taking chips in this game," McKane said darkly.

"Come on, Morg," the sharp-nosed man beside McKane said. "This little fry ain't what we're looking for."

"That's right," McKane agreed, turning his back to Jim. He said to Link, "You tell

Stacey what I told you to." Then McKane wheeled, and went out, the two flanking him.

When the batwings had slapped shut behind McKane and his men, Jim turned to find Link's eyes pinned on him. The old man asked, "Why did you do it?"

"Just like I said," Jim answered carelessly, tonguing his cigar to the other side of his mouth. "I don't like the idea of three tough hands trying to get an old boy like you hoorawed into a fight."

"There's more than that," Link said impatiently. "Who are you?"

"A gent who likes to ride. Been riding a lot lately. Mebbe I'll ride on to Prineville when I get done here. I hear they've got some purty big outfits up Crooked River. Mebbe get a job with one of 'em."

Link's eyes didn't waver from Jim's. He said, "A man don't go out of his way to save the hide of an old has-been like me when he's bucking a proddy galoot like Morg McKane. Now what's it all about?"

Jim didn't answer. He looked at Link for a moment. Then he said, "You seem to be plumb anxious about Verd Stacey. Did he hole up somewhere?"

Suddenly Link seemed to have it figured out. He smashed a fist against the bar top. "So it's a trick to find out where Verd is. It won't work, hombre. You won't find him, and McKane won't find him. Not till the stage gets here."

"Then Nola will get out of the stage, and Stacey will be with her. You reckon that'll save him?"

"No," Link said bitterly. "It won't. McKane's done so much talking Stacey will have to meet him afore dark. He wants to see Nola again. Then McKane will burn him down."

"Nola been gone quite a spell?"

"Yeah. A month. She's been with her folks up in the Wallawas. First time she's seen 'em since she was married three years ago. Say, how come you're so interested? How come you're calling her by her first name?"

Jim did not answer that question either. He was thinking of her folks, how they had never liked him. Called him a fiddle-footed drifter. Nola's dad had told him once he'd never make Nola happy. It would take a steady man, old Fred Craig had said. So Jim had gone away, over into Idaho and on into Montana looking for a stake. He'd come back, still broke, to hear that Nola had married Verd Stacey, that Stacey's father had died and left him a little spread on the John Day out of Stone Saddle a few miles. Jim hadn't blamed Nola. He never had. Some of it was his own fault. He hadn't told her where he'd gone, or why. He just figured she'd wait. But he blamed Verd Stacey because he'd told Stacey he was coming back to marry Nola. That was why he'd spent three years hating Stacey. That was why he'd come here to kill him.

"Damn it," old Link said darkly. "There's something about this I don't like. Mebbe you're in with McKane. Mebbe it's just a game to find out where Verd is. Are you gonna tell me or not?"

"Is she happy?" Jim asked softly. "Does she love Stacey?"

"No woman was ever happier," old Link answered, his face lighting up. "Just like a couple of kids, them two. Always planning things out together. Verd was kind o' wild when he was younger, but she's sure steadied him down. Old man Stacey would o' been plumb proud to call her his daughter-in-law." Then Link's face darkened.

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"Why are you wanting to know all this? What business is it of yours?"

"I reckon it's quite a bit," Jim said coldly. "I ain't staying here long. Just long enough to kill Verd Stacey."

"Kill him," Link whispered. "You . . . you're working for McKane then?"

"No. I'm settling a little personal business. Reckon I wouldn't be much man to let McKane do it for me, so I'm aiming to beat him to it." Then Jim Redden wheeled away, and left the saloon.

IT WAS a strange thing, Jim thought as he strode along the boardwalk, that a man could love and hate at the same time. Nola would never be for him. He hadn't ever let himself admit it before, but he did now. Nola would never forgive him if he killed Stacey, but if he let McKane do it, he could never look himself in the face again. This was a job he had kept putting ahead for three years. Now the time was here, and he'd do it.

There was a good side of Jim Redden that had always belonged to Nola Craig; there was a dark side that had grown darker with his hate for Verd Stacey. If his love for Nola was the stronger, he would not kill Stacey. He'd ride away and let whatever happen that would without him having a hand in it, but now the dark side was stronger. He would stay, and he would kill Stacey.

As Jim took his horse from the stable, he asked the hostler, "What time does the stage get in?"

"Most any time now."

Jim nodded, mounted, and rode back up the street. He raked his horse across the street from the hotel, moved into the shadowed coolness of a false-fronted building. There he examined his gun, and waited, a deadly coldness within him. He had killed men before, but this was different. He did not examine himself, did not want to know exactly how it was different. He did not want to know what would lie ahead when Verd Stacey was dead. He could not look beyond this moment.

All of Jim Redden's life had been a fight, with nature or other men or himself. Never had there been a day when everything was smooth, when he had reached out and secured the things in life that a man wants. Always they had been beyond him, out of

reach. Now he refused to look ahead, yet the gnawing knowledge was in him that by his own hand he was destroying the one thing that mattered most.

The stage was coming into town from the north. Verd Stacey stood in the hotel doorway, eyes on the stage, a slim-bodied, short man whose face wore a weary and troubled look. There was a squeal of brakes, a lifting cloud of dust that rose into the street and was held motionless in the thin air as the stage rolled to a stop. That was the moment when Morg McKane stepped from the Eagle Bar and started toward the hotel; in the same moment the stocky man with the drooping mustache came out of the alley across the street from the Eagle Bar and moved along the boardwalk keeping an even pace with McKane. Jim did not see the sharp-nosed man, but, familiar with this business as he was, he knew the third man was not far away.

The stage was between Jim and the hotel door where Stacey had stood. Quickly Jim crossed the street, and as he came around the back of the stage he saw Nola and Stacey together, their arms around each other, and when they broke apart he had his first look at Nola in three years. She hadn't changed. He remembered well the proud way she held her head, her slim figure, the graceful walk as she moved beside Stacey into the hotel. Then he saw something else that was different. He had a side view of her face, and he saw on it a look of happiness, of great contentment he had never seen there before.

The stage had gone on, leaving Jim in the street by himself. He heard McKane call, "Stacey, you coming out from behind your woman's skirts?"

IN THAT one brief second Jim saw it in a way he had never seen it before. In that interval of time the dark side of him, the killing side, was eclipsed by the other side, the side that had long held an unwavering love of this girl who carried her head so proudly. Nola Stacey had from life what she wanted. Who was he, Jim Redden, to be playing God with other lives?

Stacey was in the doorway, coming out to face Morg McKane's guns. Jim swung toward McKane. He said coldly, "Get off the street, McKane."

McKane didn't look at him, nor did he

answer. He was staring at Stacey, the full pleasure of something long anticipated on his face. His gun hand swept downward, clutched butt, but did not draw, for Jim Redden's Colt was thundering, smashing apart the tight stillness, and sending McKane into eternity. He wheeled sharply, pitched a bullet at the man with the drooping mustache, sent him into a lurching fall.

From the hotel another gun spoke. Jim turned to look, saw Link with a smoking Colt in his hand, saw the third McKane man wilt and topple into the dust. Silence then while gunsmoke twisted upward into the late afternoon sunlight, silence until men tumbled out of doorways into the street. Then Jim replaced his gun and strode toward his horse. He heard running feet behind him, heard a man call, "Wait," but he didn't stop. He untied his horse, and swung into the saddle.

"Wait," the man said again, and Jim looked down into Verd Stacey's face.

"You're Jim Redden," Stacey said as if he weren't quite sure. "I didn't know you,

Jim. I'm thanking you for what you just done. Don't ride away yet."

Verd Stacey had a different look about him than Jim had pictured these three years. Not as handsome as Jim had remembered, but the even, level look of a man who has much to live for. Jim had remembered him as a crook, a smart man with women and race horses. He didn't see that in him now.

"I reckon I'd better be riding, Verd," Jim said softly. "Give my regards to Nola." Then Jim rode on out of town on the road to Prineville.

For a reason Jim could not explain he felt better than he had for three years. There was no hate in him; no love for a woman who belonged to another man. He could think of what lay ahead now, and the thoughts were pleasant. He could make his own life as he desired it. He smiled a little as he reached into his pocket for a cigar. He was thinking that Verd Stacey could have handled that situation back there, and come through alive because he knew Nola would be waiting for him.



Arbuckle—Western Style

COWPUNCHERS have always been noted drinking men, and not the least of their strong drinks is their Arbuckle—better known as coffee. Throughout the West many old Grannies start in feeding coffee to the family's young hopefuls just as soon as they are able to sit up by themselves. And drinking it strong is a tradition. I remember my grandfather telling me that if I doctored it up with cream and sugar I'd never grow hair on my chest. And so I grew up drinking it, black, like most cow-country folks do.

At a high country cow-camp the coffee pot is always on the stove. There's nothing like it to take the shivers out of you after a cold ride. Of course if you aren't used to it you may just be trading in your shivers for the shakes.

A cow-camp coffee pot holds about a gallon, when it's first put into use. In between drinks it just depends on how many times it's been warmed up as to how much water there'll be room for. Each time the coffee is warmed up a tablespoon full, or more, of new coffee is added to the old grounds, calculated to help them give the brew some fresh kick. This process continues until the grounds take up so much room that a puncher can't heat up a whole cup of coffee in it at one time. When you have to 'water the grounds' and heat and pour twice to get one cup full out of the pot, then it's time to change grounds and start building up a fresh batch.

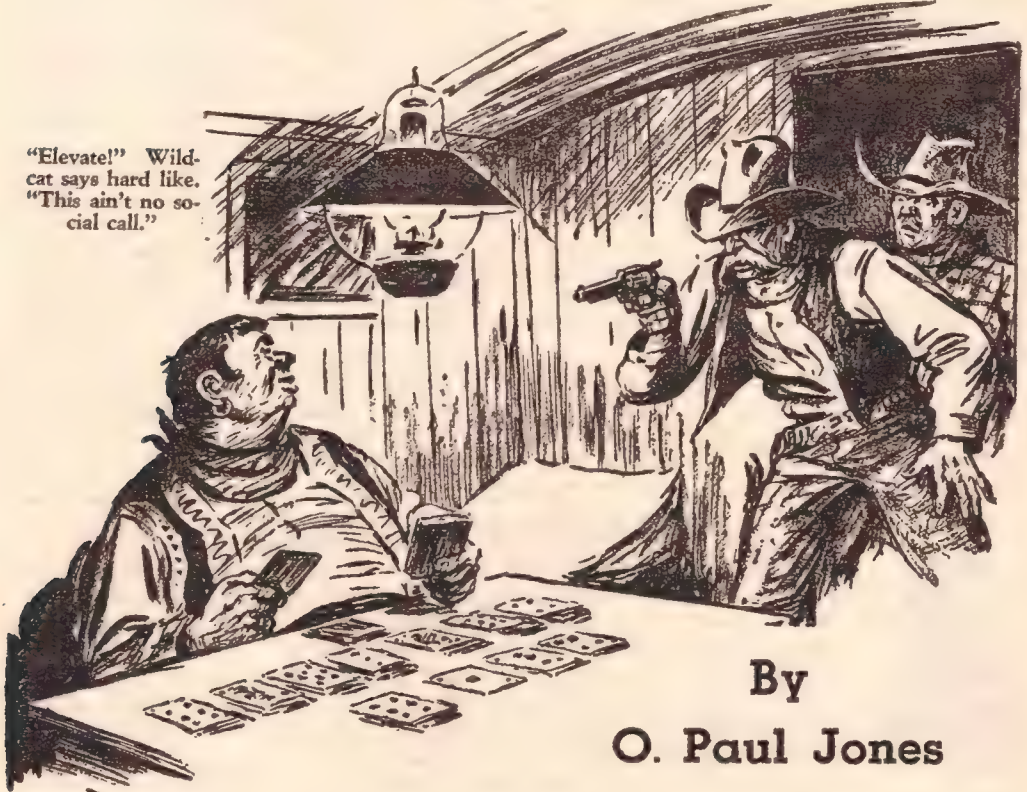
When camping out or on the trail somewhere or just traveling, though, it's different. When a puncher is on the move he can't devote too much time doing up dishes and such, every time he wants a bite to eat. So all he takes along is one good, long handled frying pan. When he's ready for a meal he starts off by slicing his meat and slapping it in the pan. While it fries he works up what bread he wants. When the meat has fried he lays it back on the chunk it came from and fries his bread in the grease. Some folks think fried bread wouldn't taste like much, but it's just as light as baked bread and it has a nice, tasty crust all crisp with grease. After the bread has fried the puncher dumps in some coffee grounds and water and brews up two or three cups full to wash his meal down. Then he lies back contentedly. A great place this West.

—Del Rayburn

Rustlin' Ain't Ethical!

"Rustlin' ain't ethical," the Wildcat says. "We're just gonna do a little innocent stealin'!" So since my belt buckle is havin' a rukus with my backbone, I agree. . . . How should I know that our innocent stealin' was three hundred pounds of trouble-on-the-hoof?

"Elevate!" Wildcat says hard like. "This ain't no social call."



By
O. Paul Jones

I AIN'T happy. From the first, this whole idea looks to me like some dang fool's nightmare. But times are tough. Cow wrangling is the only kind of a job me and the old Wildcat has ever known; and for the love o' Gawd, you can't beg, borroy, or steal a job from Flagstaff to the Mexican Border. And prickly pears and lizards don't make gut fodder—not even in a pinch.

So right about this time the Wildcat—who's about one degree prettier than hair-lipped skunk and two years younger than Plymouth Rock—gets down to cold logic.

Says he, "Dan, my belt buckle is havin' a rukus with my backbone. There jest ain't no two ways about it. I either eats—or dies!"

"Sad, ain't it?" I reply.

Wildcat scowls, showing his yaller teeth and a face so wrinkled it looks like a jug full o' worms. "Lissen here, yuh hairless, bowlegged runt. This here situation ain't funny. I ain't never done nothin' dishonest up tuh now, but—" he gulps hard—"I'm shore considerin'."

My heart jumps a little. Now like the old Wildcat, I always been pretty much on the up and up, and I really try hard not to drool as I gander out towards them fat beefers grazing on the nearby hillside. But in spite of this I find myself asking hopefully, "Wildcat, you ain't thinking of what a nice tender steak one o' them Circle C dogies yonder would make, perchance?"

Wildcat frowns. "That's rustlin'. The

Brennen boys got twenty years fer it. An' besides it ain't ethical."

"But—it might not hurt—just one little dogie, would it, Wildcat?"

"One or a hundred," he says, "it's still rustlin'." He brings out a tobacco cud and chases it with his jaw. "No, Dan, we're gonna do somethin' honestest than rustlin'."

And I foller that pointed nose o' his far down into the valley to where a little herd o' lights is gleamin' in the black. That's Cactus Bud, I know. I remember reading the name on the signpost earlier that evening. I look at Wildcat, and I notice while he chews, he's twirling the left handle o' that big mustache o' his. I know he's thinkin' hard.

He says, "Yuh remember the medicine show down there, Dan? The one with the big Mex who does all the impersonatin' and ventriloquatin', an' sells snake oil that don't come from no snake and don't cure nothin' but a fat pocketbook?"

Slowly I begin to savvy. "You ain't thinking about all that greenback hay that the Mex has taken in from the suckers, perchance, are you Wildcat?" I say much too eagerly.

He grins big. "I know it ain't exactly honest, but it'll only be this once, Dan. An' besides—the money we take from the Mex—he didn't come by it strictly legal neither."

So in this manner we half-way justify the act that we're about to pull off. Though I'm feeling kind o' low down, and I can tell by the looks in Wildcat's eyes that he's feeling about the same, though he's trying like the devil to hide it.

Well, we kick our hayburners into action then, and ride slow-like down towards Cactus Bud. Wildcat reaches down gentle and examines his sixgun. "I know a cabin 'bout two mile back in the hills," he says. "We'll hide out there till the heat blows over. Like as not we kin sneak in in the meantime and buy us a load o' vitals with part o' that greenback harvest we're gonna git."

IT DON'T take us more than an hour to get there. We circle the town cautious like 'till we come out on the north end where the Mex has got his outfit parked. There's two wagons in all, a big one and a small one. The big one is a regular house

on wheels. The small one—just a kind o' buckboard affair with a canopy over the back like a stunted covered wagon. The seat sits out in the open uncovered. It strikes me kind o' funny then, cuz I notice for the first time that there's a team hitched onto that rig, and they're tied to a pole there, munching hay in the moonlight.

There's a lamp burning through the window o' the big wagon, but outside o' that, there's no sign o' life. As we ground tie our hayburners and head for the door o' that lamplit wagon, I'm feeling about as misplaced as a banty rooster in the middle of the Rio Grande. I'm beginning to wonder if this owlhoot business ain't got to be born in you to make you cotton to it.

Then sudden-like we're right up to the wagon door, and Wildcat kicks it open.

The big Mex is sitting there playing solitaire, and he don't even seem to be surprised. He just grins big, and says, "Hola amigos!"

"Elevate!" Wildcat says hard like. "This ain't no social call." And he's looking down the muzzle o' his Colt.

The Mex straightens for a minute. But he's big and fat, and he don't seem to take us serious. Seems he'd a heap rather laugh—which he does, one o' them deep belly kind."

"What's so funny, yuh lop-eared mustang?" yells Wildcat.

"You, señores," the big Mex says, "you come weeth peestole to steak up Beeg Louie, weeth no nevair-mind for the consequence."

"Raise them paws!" Wildcat rasps. "Tuh hell with you an' yore consequence!"

It surprises and relieves me then, when I see the fat Mex raise 'em. It strikes me kind o' funny like when I think of the old harmless Wildcat making hisself sound dangerous.

Well, we rake up what cash we can find in the place—which ain't very much. Then we lock Big Louie in a closet in one corner o' the joint, and we hightail.

Then the trouble begins. Outside the door Wildcat trips on a broken board and spills our booty all over the ground. We spend about five nervous minutes picking up what we can of it; then we turn around and our horses ain't nowheres in sight.

In a pinch our eyes fall on the buckboard with the team hanging onto it, and we make for it hell bent. Then sudden-like we're

both in the seat and galloping for the hills—fast.

"These hayburners'll git us to the cabin," says Wildcat, "an' tuhmorry we kin ride 'em back tuh town fer some vitals."

I smile big and almost begin drooling. I feel a bit sheepish, though, about taking that Mex's poke. It being so simple and everything.

"Kick 'em in the slats," I say to Wildcat, who's driving, "a posse could trail us on a rocking horse at this gait."

To which he says, "Hold on then," and lets out a Comanche yell that scares them hayburners out o' seven years growth. They break into a faster gallop, the buckboard jostling roughshod.

Then sudden-like, something new is added.

I think I'm loco cuz I hear a high pitched voice which says, "How fooleesh—these American señores! Eenstead of drive out een sagebrush like jackrabbit, why they don't follow the road?"

I look at Wildcat kind o' funny like, and he likewise. His voice ain't natural as he says, "Did you say somethin', Dan?"

"No," I replies, "did you?"

He don't need to answer. We both heard the voice o' that woman behind us, but we're fooling ourselves into thinking maybe it's a mirage.

AFTER a long pause I say, "Hell, you don't have to be so nervous, Wildcat. We just hit the jackpot, that's all. We got the Mex's roll and his daughter to boot."

"But—she's a woman!" Wildcat moans.

I almost feel sorry for him, cuz I know how scairt o' women he is. But it's been a long time since I saw one o' the female critters—and this sounds to me like a bonanza.

So I say, "Simmer down, granpap—and let a young feller take care o' this sitiation." And I have a vision of a pretty set o' teeth and a little heifer about five foot two with a team o' dimples in her cheeks.

"Gawd—let's get her out!" Wildcat begs. "Please Dan—these females is dangerous! Once—I—I even got bit!"

"But Señor Wildcat—pliz!" the woman implores. "Ponda de la Rosa de la Caballa de la Blanca Casa—she no bite." And as she leans close to Wildcat, though neither one o' us can see her yet on ac-

count o' the shadow o' the canopy, I can almost feel something's going to happen.

It does.

Wildcat shoves me a sudden handful o' reins and makes a lightning drag for his cutter, belling desperate like, "I'm agonna plug the varmint!"

"No—no—Wildcat!" I protest, and after a minute I get him calmed a little. "Looky here, feller—you can't do nothing like that! Where's your manhood? 'Sides—this here gal's prob'ly sweeter than a cayuse colt. I got to give you a lesson on how a gentleman treats a gal."

And I lean back in the darkness and say, "What did you say that handle o' yours was, baby?"

I still don't see her, but I hear her answer, "Ponda de la Rosa de la Caballa de la—"

"Draw rein!" yells Wildcat. "That handle is four rods longer than the Rio Grande!"

I calm him down again and say to the gal, "Don't be afraid of Wildcat, baby. He barks loud, but he's harmless." Then getting curiouser by the minute to see her pretty face and form, I suggest, "Now honey, won't you please get out here in the light so's we can see what kind o' prize we got?"

Then what a sad showdown! She whips back the canopy, and I almost swoon as I see her standing there in the moonlight. She's three hundred pounds if she weighs an ounce, and I calculate it would take most half a day to ride around her on a fast horse.

"Pretty, ain't she?" Wildcat says sarcastic.

My turn to groan. "Yeah—pretty big."

"Oh—I am so happee!" she twitters coy-like. "Every night I weesh to be keednap by such nice American señores—an' now tonight—while I am sleep een the wagon, eet happens!"

"Some fix," Wildcat says with misery. "Now she thinks we kidnapped her. That—that's a heap worse than rustlin'."

She laughs soft. "Why you deed keednap me, señores! I am sleep een the wagon—an' all at once you take the horse, an' wagon, an' me—an' everyt'ing!"

I feel cold and clammy. I'm shivering—and somehow feeling rope burns around my adams apple. I grab the reins sort o'

numb like, and stop. "This is all been a big mistake, gal. We didn't reckon to have you with us nohow. And just to prove it we're going to let you out—so's you can canter back to town."

"But—but leetle Ponda not wants to canter back to town," she wails. "She likes much better that American señores conteenue to keednappeeng her. Eet—ees so fun!"

"Now look," moans Wildcat. "Quick—sand up to our ears. Damn—why didn't yuh let me plug the two ton pinto when I—?"

"Draw rein!" I whisper, kicking him in the shins. "I think I can untangle this rope."

I make a big smile for the gal, and say, "Okay, Ponderosa, honey. We're gonna take you along. But first I want you to get out o' that box and climb in the seat here 'tween Wildcat and me, where a queen like you belongs."

Ponderosa has pulled the canopy back up over the wagon again, so I can't see her very much, and I'm not sure whether she's climbing out the back end or not. But pretty soon I hear her giggling like a love-sick heifer, and I know she's fallen for the bait. She's climbed outa the back end, and she's lumbering around the wagon towards us.

This is my cue. I let out one blood curdling howl and whip them hayburners into action. They take off in a fast dust cloud, and Wildcat and me are so happy we're delirious as we look back in the dusty moonlight and imagine we can see poor Ponderosa standing there crying her blinkers out.

WE GO about three quarter mile before we slow them critters to a trot. And I grin big and say, "Jeez—am I glad that nightmare is over!"

"Make that a duet," says Wildcat. "But if we ever cross trails with another one o' them female critters, I'm shootin' tuh kill!"

I smile and light up my pipe, and take a big drag.

"Why don't yuh count the booty?" Wildcat says.

I have a tinge of guilt while I'm counting it. I'm still not sure that we did the right thing, and besides I'm still hungry. You can't eat this greenback hay. The whole



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thing amounts to seven dollars and twenty-nine cents, though, and I smile as I think of the vitals it will buy.

Wildcat laughs. "The Mex'll shore have tuh do a lot o' impersonatin' an' ventriloquatin' tuh cure up the hole in that pocket-book o' his'n."

I laugh too, but not very heavy like, and somehow I wonder if the Wildcat is half so happy as he looks about the deal.

When we hit the cabin by and by, the moon is halfway up over Juniper Peak. We stop the rig and climb out, the old Wildcat grinning like a slop fed sow. Somehow I got a premonition; cuz everything seems to be going too smooth.

Then it happens.

"Oh you sweet American señores," the voice with the Mex accent warbles. "You are so forgetful. Back there when I get out to come op een front seat, you forget and start to vamose muy pronto. But I am theenk queeck and jomp back een wagon again—fast." She smiles coy-like. "Ain't that make you happee—that I am back, señores?"

"Happy?" Wildcat rasps. "My Gawd woman! Why do yuh have tuh foller us around like a starvin' lobo?"

"Because I am 'ongry like the lobo wolf, amigo mio," she twitters. "'ongry for love. An' I know the American señores they love me—othairewise they do not keednap." Then her eyes look coy like from the door to me, and she says, "Oh—my leetle Señor Danny—my leetle Don Juan—you weel show leetle Ponda how much you love her—and carry her over the t'reshhold:"

I gulp big, surveying the whole three hundred pounds of her, and my face changes color like a California chameleon.

"You theenk I am leetle too—what you say—hefty, perhaps?" she asks.

"Think? Why big gal, I'd as leave carry the top o' Mt. Juniper!"

"Then Ponda weel carry you," she bubbles gayly. And before I can escape her clutches, the big heifer's got me in the crook of one arm and is hoisting me into the cabin. She plants me gentle like on the floor; sighs forlorn, and lights a lamp. Then she looks coyly at Wildcat.

"Oh Señor Wil'cat—eet ees so bad I am not tweens!"

"Twins?" moans Wildcat in disgust. "Save yer laments, big gal. A duet like you

would make the thunderin' herd look like a lovesick rabbit."

"Loveseek? oh si si señor! Ponda ees loveseek enoff so she weesh she was tweens. Then she can marry both of you."

"St. Halifax!" I snort. "First kidnap, then love, and now marriage! Woman, you're loco! We ain't neither o' us aiming to marry you. If you was the last cayuse on the plains, we'd walk."

"Oh you beeg bashful señores—you not fool leetle Ponda muy mucho. You want to marry her, she knows—othairewise you do not steal her." She smiles. "'An now Señor Wil'cat an' leetle Don Juan Danny, I fleep coin to see wheech one of you has the preevilege to marry Ponda. Heads for the Wil'cat. Tails for Señor Dan." And she reaches in her pocket for the coin.

"Draw rein, yuh mangey heifer!" Wildcat bellers out, making a dive for his cutter. "I got enough!"

"Not so queeck, señor! You are so eempulsive." Her voice sounds a little lower all of a sudden. More like a man's. And she looks dangerous. She has a black cutter in her hand and her eye is cold.

Wildcat gulps nervous like. "S-simmer d-down now—g-gal, I war'nt meanin' no harm." And he's feeling o' his empty holster.

She laughs. "You are look for some-theeng, Senor Wil-cat? Sometheeng like a peestole, perhaps?"

Wildcat pales. Then for the first time I notice what he sees. The pistol in the big heifer's paw, is Wildcat's. It gives me the creeps to try and figure just how she slipped it out of his holster.

Then she says, "You are ver' fooleesh, Señor Wil'cat. You theenk I reach een pocket to fleep coin, an' eestead I mak' fleep weeth peestole. Clevere t'reek—eh?"

"Not so wise," retorts Wildcat, though a bit meek.

"No? Then I weel mak' 'nothaire t'reek, senor. The t'ree of us weel mak' leetle treep back to town. How you like?"

WILDCAT is staring vacant like. I gulp and say desperate, "Ponderosa—we can't go back to Cactus Bud, if that's what you mean. My Gawd gal—if there' any heart in you—"

"Ees no use to beg, Señor Danny. You must bot' accompane me back to town.

Ees the custom of my people, before marriage, for the bridegroom who steal the señorita to ween the consent of her fathaire. Oh eet geeves me such beeg—what you say—teeckle!"

Wildcat and me let out a groaning duet that sounds like the death chant of an Apache. I know I ain't been so scairt in my life. An' I ain't thinking only o' this marryin' business either. I'm thinking a lot o' Big Louie, her father, and the pay dirt we got o' his. But I'm thankful the big heifer don't know nothing about the poke, cuz I still got a faint hope we might be able to talk her out of the foolish notion she's got, somehow.

But then my hopes is dashed. "Come on, señores," she says.

"Gawd!" Wildcat moans. "We're not the marryin' kind, woman! Neither o' us would make a fit husban' fer a female prairie dog. Why Dan there eats with his knife, an' swears like a mule skinner; an' I kick about my grub, an' spit terbaccy juice on the floor, and sleep with muh spurs on, an'—"

"A leetle training weel tak' care of all that, señores," she coos. "So now—we go!"

"An' after we find yore old man—then what?" rasps Wildcat.

"Then I fleep coin for real, señores, "to see wheech ees the lucky one to marry me."

"Jumpin' jeepers!—yer too good to us, yuh two ton pinto!" yells Wildcat. "I ain't goin'!"

She swings the cutter on him menacing. "The Señor Wil'cat can be ver' aggravate at times. You mus' be more careful, señor—that you do not feex theengs so that eet weel not be necessary to fleep coin." She hesitates. "Go now, señores. I count to t'ree—an' then—" she starts counting slow like, "Uno—dos—t-t—"

We turn, Wildcat and me, and file out into the moonlight like lovesick coyotes. Ponderosa follows us easy like. She's got

the gun, and when I catch her grinning big, she drops that grin like a hot spud, and scowls.

Me and the Wildcat are silent as we climb into the driver's seat. Ponderosa climbs in behind us, still watching us close. We give the hayburners their head, and they make for Cactus Bud on the trot.

I try to light my pipe, but I'm so nervous the match goes out in a second. I think it's the wind, so I lean closer to Wildcat and strike another match. The flame is just close enough to scare up a prairie fire in the right handle o' Wildcat's mustache, and the stuff burns like sage.

"Holy jeepers!" he yells, and nigh knocks hissself into a blind funk beating out the flames. I tell him how sorrowful I am, and then I manage to get my pipe perculating. I begin to puff so vicious-like that the smoke clouds make the rig look like a hell-train galloping through no-man's land.

By the time we get back to Cactus Bud, the smoke back under that canopy must be so thick you can cut it with the rowels of a spur, cuz Ponderosa blurts dry like, "Carumba—! los American señores mak' smoke like El Torro, the bull at the bull fight!"

"You ain't seen nothin'," warns Wildcat, gaining hope. "Wait'll yuh try tuh harness these mustangs. We'll make this torro critter look like a lady-broke cow."

"Ah—but leetle Ponda ees not worry, señor. She weel mak' the mustang tame—lak' colts."

Wildcat groans. That stops him cold. He forks his jaw a little, and starts gal-lumping them over his cud; then he leans past my nose and try's to spit through the smoke at Ponda, but the stuff runs amuck in the fog and lands smack dab in the bowl o' my pipe. It sizzles, and I jump and bang Wildcat unbeknowing, and the jar makes him half swaller his terbaccy cud. His eyes roll funny like.

To Our Subscribers:

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Ponderosa laughs big. "The American señores are so funny! First they mak' beeg bom-fire; then they mak' beeg speet to put eet out."

Me and Wildcat are too numb to answer. We're getting closer every minute to the north end o' town where Big Louie's rig is parked, and I rub my brow and look at my hand cuz I think that I'm sure sweating blood.

"Stop by the beeg wagon," says Ponda.

It's pathetic to see Wildcat then. "Please gal," he croaks, "yuh—ain't really meanin' tuh go through with this locoed marriage idear?"

"Why not, señor?" she says.

"Well, by Gawd—yuh ain't gonna rope *me* intuh it!" he rasps.

"Ropes—either one way or anothaire," she says sweet like. "One of you marries leetle Ponda—or else—" and she makes the sign of a lariat crossing her neck.

"By Gawd—I'd rather be hung!" Wildcat bellers hysterical.

"To the beeg wagon," she hisses cold—and presses the cutter up against the back o' Wildcat's neck.

I'M THINKING about the Mex in there and the way he's gonna unwind on us in about two minutes. Funny thing—I ain't even hungry no more. I'm panic struck. I'm thinking what a helluva way this is to make a living. Then I glance at Wildcat and I'm kinda mad. I can see he ain't even given the big Mex a thought. He's only thinking that he might have to tie up permanent with the big heifer, and it's most driving him loco.

Then sudden like we stop by the big wagon and climb out, and Ponderosa motions to go inside.

Them last few steps is like the death march to the gallows. I look up towards heaven, desperate like, but somehow, I know there's no use. We can't get no help from up there, cuz helping a brace o' owlhoots ain't in a good cause. I know for certain now that this owlhooting has to be born in you to make it tolerable.

But sudden like I'm determined to take my medicine. I straighten up and push Wildcat through the door, and foller him inside.

I'm surprised. I'm amazed! The room is still there, with the lamp burning—but

Big Louie, the Mex, he just ain't around.

"Seet down now, señores," says Ponderosa. "I weel fleep the coin and then call padre."

Wildcat sits there for a nervous minute, twitching what's left o' his mustache, then he jumps to his pins and rasps frantic, "No—don't do it—please! It 'ud be bigamy, gal! We each got a wife and seven pa-poooses in Tia Juana."

"You lie, Señor Wil'cat," she purrs. "Now I weel fleep the coin."

I don't say nothing. I'm numb. But when I look at Wildcat, he's thinking hard. He leans towards me, and in a jiffy he's got the poke that we stole, and he's looking at the big heifer with a half grin. Then he shoves the money up under her nose and says soft like, "How does that marriage idear o' yourn stack up agin this fistful o' dinero, big gal?"

My heart jumps a little as she replies, "Oh—señores—but thees ees so unusual!" Then softer. "How much ees there?"

"Seven dollar's and twenty-nine cents," croaks the Wildcat, and he looks to her for an answer.

She does, which same almost floors me.

"Deed you drop the rest of eet, Señor Wil'cat, when you stumble as you mak' your getaway from Beeg Louie?"

I know now the gal's been running a sandy on us. She's knowed that we robbed her old man all along.

Wildcat's tongue-tied. I'm shamed, and flabbergasted, and scairt to death all at the same time. I talk at last, but it sounds like a cayuse itching his rump on a cottonwood tree.

I say, "Ponderosa—for God's sake, gal—please have a little heart. Me and the old Wildcat—this is our first trip on the owlhoot, s'help me."

"I know, señores." The voice that cuts in, is coming from Ponderosa's lips, but it's dropped two octaves, and sounds like a crosscut chewing through a pine knot. "I have know all along. See—I show you." And the gal starts disrobing before our eyes.

First the skirt, under which we see a pair o' pants. Then the blouse, under which we see a shirt. Then the long black wig, under which we see—"My Gawd!" I blurt. "Big Louie!"

"Si señor," the big Mex replies. "You

are ver'—what you call—eendeescreet, when you try to rob Beeg Louie, the magician. Look—I could have get my money back long ago—way back on the trail, but I am savvy you are both—what you call—the greenhorn, and I am wanting to teach you lesson.” He smiles big. “You are fooleesh and lock Beeg Louie een closet, but you don’t search his pocket for key. And een that closet are the clothes of la señorita, wheech ees his favorite eemersonasheon.”

I look at Wildcat and his face is green. I’m feeling likewise.

But the big Mex just keeps talking.

“And then, señores, I am sneak out the back door, hide your horses, and jomp een buckboard.” He laughs big-like. “And out on trail, when you stop the wagon and tell me to get out and come een front, I don’t get out, lak you t’ink—but just t’row my voice out there lak’ thees”—and he proceeds to giggle, and make a sound with his mouth like big feet tramping, only it sounds like it ain’t coming from him at all, but from somewheres outside o’ the wagon.

That floors me. I am windbroke, and weak-kneed, and ready to toss in the sponge. I heave a big sigh of defeat, and say, “Okay Louie—I guess this hand is yours. Call in the law.”

But the Mex only laughs big. “No law, señores. Your horses—you weel find them tie to the cottonwood out behind. I am know you do not mak’ thees meestake again. So now vamore amigos.”

I look at Wildcat, and he looks at me; then we both turn sheepish like and head for the door. And as we’re filing out into the moonlight, I hear the big Mex say:

“Eef the señores are still ’ongry and look for work, they can come back mañana. Beeg Louie can use them. He theenks they are—what you call—ver’ good driver of the buckboard.”

Well, the Wildcat looks at me kind o’ sheepish like, and we smile a duet. He don’t say nothing, and I’m likewise, but I know we’re both thinking how lucky we are, and what a hell of a business this owlhooting is—and how we’ll be out to take Big Louie up on that job offer, come morning.



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IMPORTED
BRIAR

Strange Sons of the Desert

By C. W. Chamberlain



Cowchip's taste for coffee was gone.

Crack-brained Cowchip Lee—member in good standing of the hell-roaring, locoed Lees—bore no animosity to either of his traveling companions. . . . He simply felt called on to commit another murder before the fiery sun set in desolate Death Valley.

THE teen-aged halfbreed on the seat between the mule-skinner and his swamper, felt a murder coming on. It didn't make much difference which of his companions became the victim of this impulse. But the sun should not set in Death Valley without a new notch on his gun.

"Smith, I think I'll kill you," the black-eyed youth with dark, stringy hair said in a matter-of-fact tone, lowering the bandana tied across his flat nose and loose-lipped

mouth to keep out the dust raised by the twenty-mule team.

The heavy-set driver turned pale under his weather-beaten tan. He knew that the young hardcase meant exactly what he said, and Smith was unarmed. He peered anxiously ahead along the Daggett-Death Valley trail but there was no living thing in sight. Behind him was only the wide tire tracks of the borax wagon, rapidly being covered with drifting sand.

Smith fully realized that the homicidal threat was no joke. He knew Cowchip Lee by reputation. In fact, he knew the whole Lee family for as hell-roaring a bunch of locoed lobos as lived in the desert region.

Cowchip was in no special hurry. He could wait until after they camped and had eaten their evening meal. Then he could take his time and enjoy the killing.

All this, Cowchip casually explained as he sat quietly beside his perspiring prey, chewing tobacco and decorating the tailends of the wheel-team with his exhortating. Between his knees was a sawed-off shotgun, and his belt carried pistol and knife.

McChristian, Smith's swamper, whose duty it was to assist the driver, was occupied in pelting the lead mules with small stones to keep them moving in the blistering afternoon heat. He said nothing. Mac, redheaded and blue-eyed, was about the same age as the halfbreed. But, like Smith, he was unarmed. He, too, knew that Cowchip was not talking just to hear the sound of his own voice. Murder was in the air.

Smith apprehensively wondered if there wasn't some way to avert his doom. He finally decided to take refuge in flight before it was too late. He dropped his bullwhip beside the trail; muttered something about retrieving it; handed the reins to Mac and suddenly jumped off the wagon. Then he hid behind some rocks while the outfit went on without him. He expected the halfbreed to alight and begin shooting but Lee made no disturbance. He was busy amusing himself by spitting tobacco juice at a shining bit of metal on the offside wheel mule's crupper. It was several minutes before his laborious efforts at celebration told him that Smith had outwitted him.

"Well, no matter," Cowchip commented complacently to the swamper. "I'll kill you 'stead of him. It's too hot to chase after Smith and I'm not particular who I kill. When we camp tonight, I'll gutshoot you. I don't reckon you'll like it much but I'll have to do it or I won't get no sleep."

A short time later, they turned into a dry-wash where a party was already camped. It was a group of prospectors on their way to the Panamints and McChristian was relieved to see that they had guns. While Cowchip was rustling the grub and using the fire built by the campers, Mac held a

hurried consultation with the strangers. One of them who knew the Lees by reputation handed the swamper a rifle.

Cowchip was drinking coffee when the youth rejoined him. The halfbreed ignored the gun in Mac's hands and invited him to have some hot java.

McChristian wasn't hungry. He aimed the rifle at Cowchip's head and pulled the trigger. The results were eminently satisfactory as the halfbreed's addled brains were scattered over the landscape.

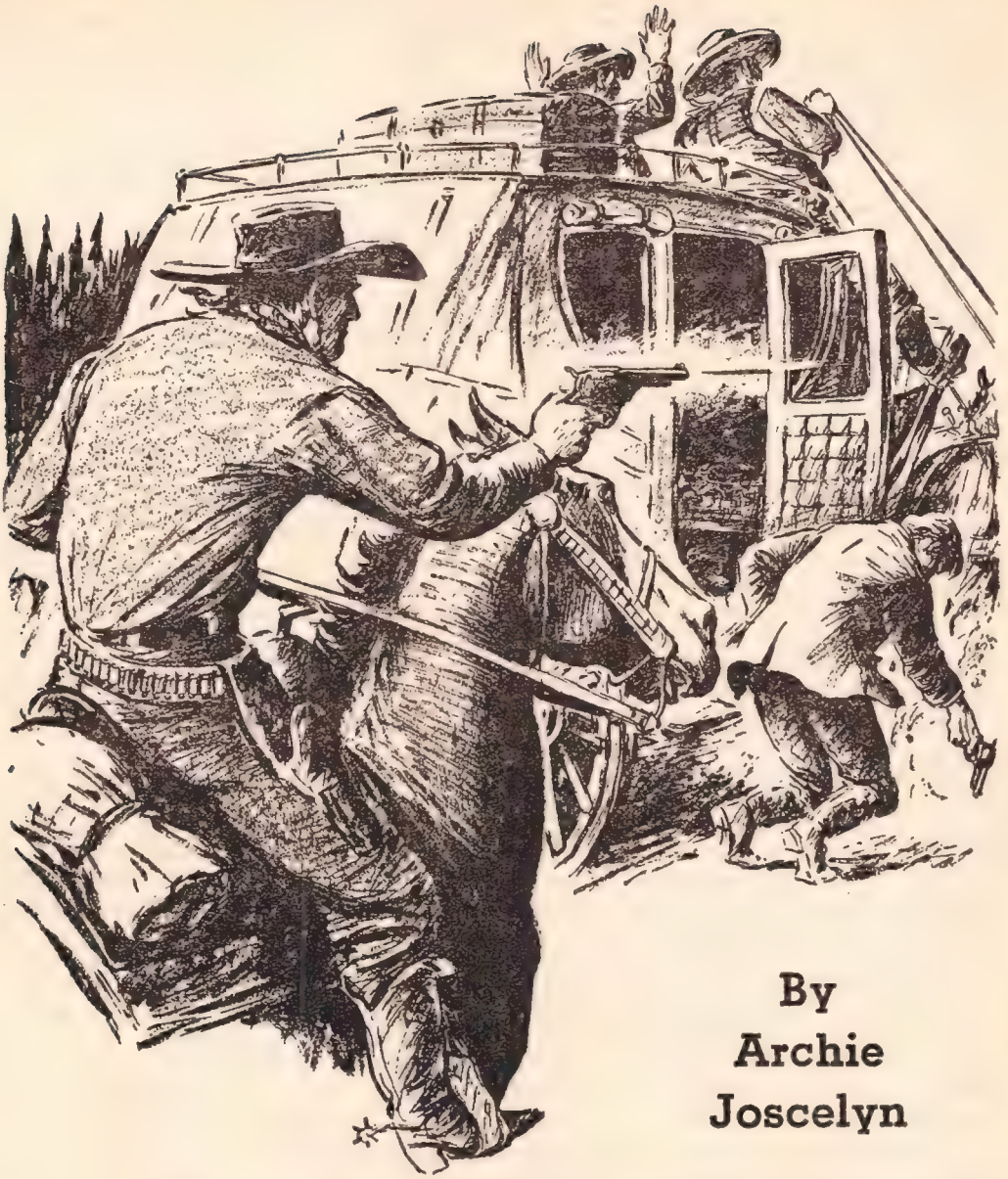
IT was just such violent brain-storms among the Lees that gave them the reputation for being the most locoed family in the Death Valley region where rugged individualism and half-cracked idiocyncracies went hand-in-hand.

It was in 1857, that four Lee brothers came out of the nowhere, some say the Kentucky hills, and began to run cattle from distant areas into the Death Valley region. The brothers carried the names of Leander, Philander, Meander and Salamander. The fifth brother, Alexander, turned up a bit later.

Philander, learning of the death of Cowchip at the hands of the young swamper, left Resting Springs, where his Indian woman handled the ranching, and he followed the Daggett-Death Valley trail in an effort to catch up with McChristian. It took far less than a sudden mortality in the family to start a hell-roarin' riot among the Lee brothers.

But this time Philander was outmatched. His violent temperament began to cool off when he met ranchers and borax miners prepared to fit him with a hempen necktie. Plumb discouraged by this reception, the old man allowed them to fill him up with hard liquor and send him home with Cowchip's remains. Becoming tired of the corpse on the way, Philander dumped it in a draw and sang himself to sleep.

The modern saga of Tobacco Road can offer nothing more amazing than that of the Lee brothers. The fact that they pioneered the Death Valley area gives them a place in history while their violent and crack-brained exploits expand with the imagination of the settlers who followed them into the desolate wilderness. No story involving the Lees ever is considered too preposterous.



By
**Archie
Joscelyn**

CHAPTER ONE

Guns, Fists and Memories

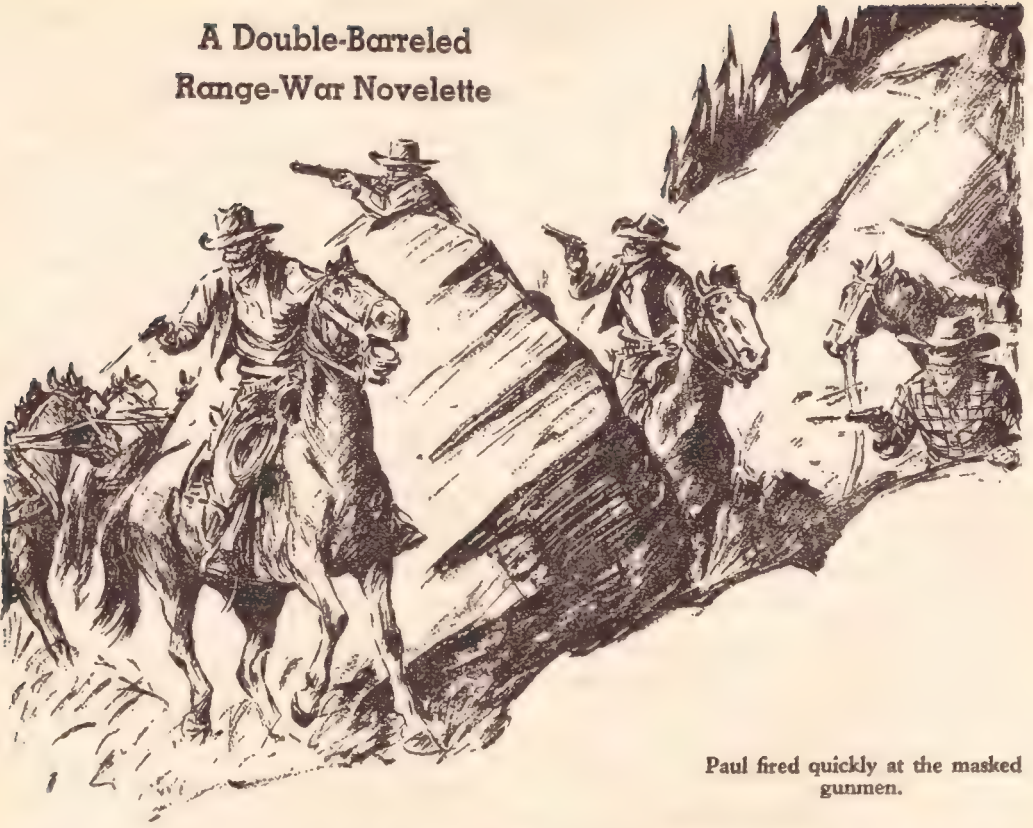
IT WAS chance, on this high mountain road, with pines distilling their fragrance on the air, that the stage should rattle around a bend and swing past Paul Monroe, as he pulled his hoof-worn cayuse to the side; chance too, that he should look for an instant into the deep, somehow wistful eyes of one of the passengers as it went by him,

and feel a strange sort of kinship with the man—as though they were both lost wayfarers, trying to get home.

Pure chance, too, that he should be there, half-enveloped in its dust, as the rifle cracked from a piled cluster of boulders just ahead, and the stage pulled up with a sudden screech of brakes.

Things happened fast, then. The express guard beside the driver was bringing up his shotgun, another outlaw gun was blasting from the side. In the confusion, with

A Double-Barreled
Range-War Novelette



Paul fired quickly at the masked gunmen.

Ramrod's Death-Point

Paul Monroe's life was just a long series of chances. So, when he noticed the big pair of dice painted on the barn at Paradise Ranch, he should have figured that his greatest chance would hit soon—a trigger-swift toss against a band of gold-crazed killers—with instant death as Satan's point.

somebody tumbling out from the stage and sunlight agleam on a gun in his hand, there was opportunity enough for Monroe to pull his horse back and off the road, out of sight, had he wished. It would have been easy to argue that this hold-up was none of his affair.

But his mind didn't work that way. Law and order was every honest man's affair; either you supported it, or you didn't have any, and pretty soon a country was no fit place to live in. He'd seen such places. For himself, he liked to be able to look at himself in a glass when he shaved, to be able to live with himself. That was the creed he lived by, and now his gun was in his hand

and jerking as he threw lead back at the masked trio.

Something jarred him like the slog of a giant sledgehammer, and he knew then, as he kicked feet free of stirrups, that his horse was hit. It was going down, and he was out of the saddle and landing on his feet like a cat, and his gun was empty. However the robbers suddenly fled, back among the trees, while the last gun-echoes whispered mockingly in the distance.

"Damndest thing I ever saw," the express guard was saying in amazement. "Here they had the edge on us, and we packin' all that dinero—and then they run like scared rabbits. That I can't figger."

THE fight had been short, but lively while it lasted. Besides Monroe's own horse, one man lay stretched now in the dust of the road, blood straining his forehead and making a sticky crimson mud where it trickled to the dust. He was a tall, fair-haired man, with a curiously pale face and clothes that somehow looked too new. Monroe saw, with a shock, that he was the passenger whose glance had met his, only moments before.

Monroe stooped above him, somehow feeling a strange regret. Then he saw that the man wasn't dead. Though if the stick-up gents had supposed him to be, they would have been justified by appearances. Now he groaned and stirred a little, and with Monroe's aid was presently able to stand, then to climb back inside the stage with some help. The bullet had creased him, knocking him cold, coming dangerously close to being fatal.

The driver, watching Monroe aid him, snorted at discovery that the stranger was not too badly hurt, after all.

"Luck of pilgrims and fools," he muttered. "What'd you want to go climbin' out and take a hand in it for, anyway?"

"Why—why, it seemed like the right sort of thing to do," the passenger explained.

"Better leave that sort of thing to men who know their way around," the driver suggested. "Plumb dangerous otherwise. Yo're lucky to be no more'n nicked." He looked down a long nose at Monroe, who had come up with his saddle. "You want a ride on in tuh town, eh? Well, guess yuh earned it," he added grudgingly.

"I could use it," Monroe agreed, and slung his saddle to the top of the stage, then climbed inside. The tenderfoot who had been wounded looked as though he would have spoken, had he felt better, but evidently he was suffering from a headache, and no one else seemed much inclined to talk, which suited Monroe as they edged down off the mountain. He preferred his own thoughts. Not that they were too pleasant. This scenery stirred old memories, most of them bitter.

Town was a dozen miles ahead, with the main hills left behind. The pilgrim sat stonily, his eyes half-glazed with pain, plainly fighting to keep from fainting. His wound, not deep, had stopped bleeding, but the dried blood gave him a ghastly look,

They rattled into Spur, and to a stop. Monroe considered whether to help the man to a hotel, but he made it off up the street under his own power. Monroe's idea that there was a lot that was funny, increased. But it was none of his business. He ranged his eyes, without much interest, over the town, seeing buildings that he had known long ago. But no men he remembered, or who appeared to remember him, either. Which was just as well. He got himself a meal, then, saddle slung over his shoulder again, headed for the livery barn at the edge of town.

Tall weeds grew luxuriant at the side of it, nearly horse high. Frogs croaked from a slough just beyond. The big barn itself, with afternoon sun filtered down to a musty dimness, was nearly empty. Two or three horses stirred in stalls, but no one seemed to be about. Then, from a corral at the rear, Monroe heard sounds, and moved to the back door. He paused there, just inside, unseen, watching for a few moments, his nose pinching in a little, long jaw clamping hard, eyes narrowing.

There was a corral back here, as he had guessed. A scared-looking man stood at the far side and watched, but he made no protest at what was happening. Tied to one of the upright posts was a big horse, a third heavier than the average cayuse, longer in the barrel, built for speed and endurance. Midnight black, save for a white spot on his forehead and one front foot.

Snubbed now with both bridle and heavy halter, and an inch rope twisted through and around that, head close to the post, the horse could only stand and take the thrashing it was receiving, and quiver to the unmerciful strokes of a heavy bull-whip.

The man wielding the whip was young looking but rangy, his brown hair sodden now with sweat from his efforts, showing a little red at the edges of his head, like the glint in his eyes. A handsome face, under ordinary circumstances—but now contorted with a cold, merciless fury which was finding expression in the lashing administered to the midnight horse.

It was a heavier than the ordinary whip, and every cutting stroke raised welts along the glossy coat of the black. Already it had taken severe punishment. Whatever its fault, it had been licked enough. But it took only a few moments for Monroe to see that

the man with the whip had no intention of stopping. The trembling cayuse was dancing, its breath whistling with pain, blood flecked its hide. But the whip rose and fell remorselessly.

Monroe crossed the corral. His voice was taut and icy.

"That'll be enough," he warned.

The man with the whip appeared not to hear. It slashed again. Monroe dropped an ungentle hand on his shoulder.

"I said that would be enough!" he repeated.

This time he was heard. The other man spun about, red-shot eyes glaring into Monroe's. He raised the whip threateningly.

"What's it to you?" he grated. "If I want to kill this cayuse, I will. Now git!"

"I don't like to see a fine horse mistreated that way," Monroe said. "If he had it coming, he's had more'n plenty."

"That's all you know!" The voice was sneering, furious. "That horse is a devil. He's thrown me for the last time. Now I'm going to cut the hide off him!"

"You've done plenty," Monroe repeated. "I—"

Before he could finish, the whip came whistling at his own head and shoulders. Monroe caught it as the heavy lash coiled like fire about him, jerked suddenly, and had it. Fury shook him. He brought it slashing in turn about the other man's legs, then, as the maddened man leaped at him, he tossed the whip aside and used his fists.

FIVE minutes later, with a savage satisfaction, he nursed his bruised knuckles and gazed down at the man stretched in the dust. The latter, the rage and fight both knocked out of him, looked up very sullenly.

"I'm buyin' that horse," Monroe told him. "What's the price?"

Astonishment replaced some of the rage as the other man stood up.

"What do you want of him?" he demanded. "I tell you that horse is a devil. No man can ride it. He's a killer."

"Maybe," Monroe admitted. "Maybe not. If you feel that way, you'll be glad to be rid of him. Here's a hundred dollars, cash. Write me a bill of sale."

The other man extended his hand with sudden cupidity, then half withdrew it again.

"As a horse, he's worth more'n that," he said.

"Better take it," Monroe warned. "My temper's none too good yet."

"I'll take it—and I hope he kills you," the other snarled.

It had been Monroe's intention to get a horse and be on his way before dark. But now he spent the night in town. For an hour he worked with the big black, bathing and greasing his welts, gradually soothing him to calmness again. By morning, he figured, with a good blanket, the horse could bear a saddle.

So it proved. And the staring stableman watched in amazement. Monroe talked to the black for full ten minutes before he cinched the saddle in place. When he swung up, the horse stood for a full minute, trembling, while Monroe leaned forward and rubbed it between the ears and talked. And then, quietly enough, it went off like an old cowpony.

"I'd never of believed it, if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes," the stable-man swore. "That hombre sure has a way with horses—and with men," he added reflectively. "Way



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he handled that ornery cuss yesterday was a sight for sore eyes. And he made that hoss know he was a friend. Never bucked once."

CHAPTER TWO

Boss Woman

TWENTY-FOUR hours from the time of the hold-up, Monroe reached his destination. This was Paradise Ranch, as he'd heard it called—though the brand, painted on the end of the big barn, showed a pair of dice, with three and four spots displayed, there might still, as in the old days, be considerable difference between pair of dice and paradise, Monroe reflected, gray eyes sweeping the place appraisingly.

Three or four men lounged on the grass before the barn, though it was too early for quitting. Loafing, it looked like to Monroe. They looked up at him, half-interested, half-insolent, as he leaned over the saddle horn.

"I'm lookin' for the boss," Monroe said curtly. "He around?"

One man removed a straw from between his teeth and shook his head.

"Not right now," he denied. "Be back this evenin', likely."

"I'll wait," Monroe said, and swung down. He turned at a step and flutter of skirts, and saw that a woman had come around the corner of the house. She wore a long skirt of some blue material to match her eyes. He realized that she wasn't much over twenty, despite that level way she had of looking at a man.

"I'm the boss," she announced shortly. "You said you were looking for me."

The man who had spoken, replaced the straw between his teeth and grinned, rather insolently, Monroe thought, and the girl's face went hot and then white, though she didn't deign to look at the sprawling lout. Her eyes were on Monroe's, almost challenging now.

"You'll be Paul Monroe," she added quietly. "I've been expectin' you."

A little of his surprise must have shown in his face, schooled as it was in betraying no emotion. Monroe, half-resentfully, swept off his hat.

"I'm Monroe," he admitted. And then, because he somehow felt that he had been

tricked, and was always blunt of speech, he added sharply. "I didn't count on workin' for a woman. That letter was signed M. L. Wayne."

"I'm M. L. Wayne," she assured him, and her eyes were appraising. They too, rested curiously on the big black for a moment, then swung back to his face. "Mary Louellen Wayne," she added. "So you're one of those men who can't work for a woman, eh? Even if she's a better man than those she has to hire?"

Monroe felt the color rising in his face at that, and resentment was hot on his tongue. But he checked it at the sound of hoof-beats, looking up to stare in amazement at the man who rode arrogantly up now—the same man whom he had licked in town the day before, and from whom he had bought Midnight.

"What's this hombre doing here, Mary?" the newcomer demanded sharply. "If it's a job, there's no place for him on Paradise Ranch."

"Why?" Mary Lou demanded sharply, and her eyes told nothing.

"Why? Because he's no good. He—"

"I notice that he's riding Midnight—which you could never do, Vail," she said softly.

Vail's face colored angrily.

"Do you know what happened in town yesterday?" he demanded. "He practically forced me to sell the horse to him—"

"And licked you to do it, I judge, from that black eye and all," Mary Lou nodded. "Is that it?" Without waiting for an answer, she swung to Monroe again.

"I see you've met Vail," she said. "My—brother. I can guess what happened. Whatever you did to him, he had it coming. Vail, this man is the new foreman of Paradise Ranch. Starting now."

Vail Wayne's face was a mixture, compounded mostly of wrath and frustration, but he said nothing. Monroe grinned suddenly.

"Thanks," he agreed. "I reckon mebbey I'm going to like this job, after all."

MARY LOU WAYNE had edged him into taking it, neatly enough, but that suited him better, since it was rather plain that she had to battle the active animosity of her brother and, apparently, of the crew here as well.

An hour or so later, most of the crew,

nearly a dozen men in all, had straggled in. There was Flint DeVore, who had been foreman, Monroe discovered, up to his coming. DeVore was a tall, rangy hombre with a bald head and a ferocious mustache, and while he was outwardly friendly enough, Monroe could sense the antagonism which he felt toward him who had been brought in to take his place.

Monroe felt a sudden nostalgia, almost a wave of homesickness, as he went with the others into the big kitchen of the old house to supper. Everyone ate together, Mary Lou and Vail with the rest. There was one man there whom he hadn't met before. Sam Sugrue. A man who smiled good-naturedly, who seemed always to be smiling. It was almost as though that smile was a mask.

He ate for a few minutes in silence, appraising them, his mind continually coming back to Sugrue. He'd seen that hombre somewhere before, but where? And then he became aware that Sugrue, smiling blandly, was speaking.

"Reckon this is like old times, eh, Monroe?" he asked jovially.

Monroe looked up sharply.

"Why should it be?" he asked.

"Why, you bein' raised here, and all," Sugrue said amiably. "When a feller's played around a ranch as a button—fished an' learned to ride an' shoot an' all the rest. What I mean is," he added deliberately, while everyone listened tensely. "You're sayin' you're Paul Monroe. But I reckon my eyes ain't gone back on me, yet. You're Paul McKenzie, ain't yuh? And yore dad used to own Paradise Ranch?"

The silence held tensely for a moment. It had been ten years since he'd ridden away from Paradise Ranch, and then just as a kid. He'd never dreamed that anyone around here would know him—he became aware that Sugrue was speaking again.

"Mebbe you had some reason for droppin' the McKenzie—and tryin' to make folks believe that you was somebody else?"

"I've been known as Paul Monroe for years," Monroe said tightly. "I dropped the McKenzie—for family reasons."

"Yeah?" That was Flint DeVore, and there was a sneer in his voice. "You expect us to believe that—McKenzie? My guess would be that you've come back to make trouble."

Monroe pushed back from the table. The scrape of his chair was loud in the room as he stood and rested his knuckles on the table.

"You can do all the guessin' you like, DeVore, he said evenly. "If it's trouble you're lookin' for, I can promise you one thing—you'll get all you want!"

Mary Lou was standing up too. There was a spot of color in either cheek, a sparkle in her eye.

"Mr. Monroe is foreman here now, and I expect he'll handle things his own way," she said. And as he walked out of the room, Monroe found her beside him.

Outside, by the big cottonwoods, he paused.

"I'm McKenzie," he said, a little harshly. "But I'll tell you this much. I haven't used the name for years. And when I got your letter, askin' me to take the job of

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foreman, I'll admit I was interested in seeing the old place again. But I didn't come back with any notion of making trouble on that account."

"I'm sure of that," Mary Lou said softly. "I understand your father set out this row of cottonwoods?"

His harsh face softened a little.

"Yeah," he agreed. "He did a lot of things to make a home. These trees were just about as high as I was, along when I can first remember. Seems like they sort of outdistanced me."

"Yes. You do feel a little bitter, don't you?" There was sympathy in her voice. "I suppose that having owned Paradise Ranch once—or having expected to inherit it—that you've felt cheated, at times?"

He looked at her curiously. This was the last thing that he had intended to talk about, but it seemed natural enough to admit it to her now, in this old, familiar setting.

"That's right," he conceded. "I guess I did feel cheated—more or less. But like I say, I didn't come back for that reason. Good jobs, as foreman of a spread like this, are mighty scarce. I sure don't blame you any for what happened. I know you didn't have anything to do with it."

"Thank you," she agreed. "I'm glad you're back," she added suddenly. "And glad that it's your old home. Maybe you'll take sort of a—a personal interest. And as to feeling cheated—maybe you were. There's been a lot of funny things—going on around here."

She turned abruptly, was going back to the house. Monroe looked after her, puzzled, a little startled. He'd intended to have a talk with her—as foreman, he needed to know a lot of things. Instead of that, they'd talked about his affairs.

CHAPTER THREE

Take Your Side!

THE dark was creeping up, seeming to roll out of the coulees, to swell out from the long shadows. The crew had trooped out from the house, some heading for the bunkhouse, others simply seeming to vanish. From where he stood now in the obscurity of the big trees, Monroe saw Sugrue pass, going down the road. The man walked with a roly-poly sort of gait to match his

smile, but he was hurrying now, and suddenly he seemed as purposeful and intent as a hound dog on a hot scent.

Monroe looked after him, curiously. A little light still filtered down from the darkling sky, and in it, just at the edge of vision, he saw a second man. Moving silently, Monroe narrowed the distance.

Here was another act in keeping with the strangeness at Pair o' Dice. Sugrue had accosted the other man suddenly, then, apparently without warning, had assaulted him. Monroe saw the flash of a clubbed gun, heard the sound of a barrel slashing hard against a skull, saw the other man waver on his feet, a rather stupid expression of bewilderment overspreading his face at this treacherous and plainly unexpected attack. Then he crashed heavily down, once more unconscious—but not before Monroe had recognized him as the man who had been passenger on the stage the day before, who had been creased by the outlaw's bullet and left for dead as they rode away.

Calmly, callously now, Sugrue was stooping above the fallen man, and the clubbed gun in his hand was lifting again—for another blow which would finish smashing the other man's skull. He checked the motion, turned with startled haste as Monroe raced up, and swung the gun with frantic desperation at Monroe. A blow which, if it had landed, would have ended the fight.

Monroe dodged, his fist caught Sugrue in the face and sent him staggering back. Before he could recover, Monroe was swarming all over him. A left to the stomach sank deep, drawing a grunt from Sugrue, and the gun, lifting again, sagged. Monroe twisted it away, struck again. Sugrue wavered, and he hit him once more, saw him topple back and lie prone and unmoving.

Breathing a little heavily, Monroe saw that his knuckles were skinned again and bleeding a bit. He stooped above the waylaid stranger, and one quick glance was enough to show that the man was hurt badly. The smashing blow of the gun-barrel had ripped open an edge of his scalp, nearly at the spot where the rifle bullet had creased it the day before.

Stooping, grunting a little with the effort, Monroe gathered the unconscious man up in his arms. He hesitated, looking around. It had been his first intention to carry him

back to the house, but a sense of caution warned him that it might be better not to take him there. Something was going on here at Pair o' Dice—a gamble, he had a hunch, for big stakes. Somehow, this stranger was involved, and two attempts had been made to murder him already.

For the sudden and rather surprising withdrawal of the bandits the day before seemed explained now. They had figured this man as dead, and that must have been the real purpose of stopping the stage. Finding that he was still alive, Sugrue, discovering him approaching the ranch in the dusk, had aimed to finish that job of killing. He would have done so in another moment if Monroe hadn't intervened.

That much was clear enough, at least, whatever motives might lie behind it. To take this injured man to the house might be no kindness to him. Everyone would know, then—and every member of the crew here, Monroe had a hunch, including Vail Wayne himself, were ranged with Sugrue in whatever was afoot.

Which left Mary Lou and himself—and this unconscious stranger—on the other side.

There was the shadowy outline of an old building close at hand. He kicked the door open, and saw that it had been used for some sort of a tool shed once, though it had been built since his day, and apparently little used of late. That was understandable, since

the ground beneath it, even the ground floor inside, was soft and mucky, from the seepage of an old spring.

Monroe remembered that. His father had laid tile and drained this swampy section, and it had probably been dry ground when the shack was built. Likely the tiles had rotted or become clogged in the years since, and the ground, no longer drained, was muggy again.

The building was of logs, with only one small, boarded-up window. In a corner was a pile of old planks, one or two tools. Nothing else. Monroe laid his burden down, used his own handkerchief to tie up the cut and check the bleeding a little. It would be best, he decided, to leave the man here, and go to the house and bring Mary Lou. If this man was connected with Paradise Ranch and its mystery, she'd probably know what it was about.

MONROE came outside. It was quite dark now, and he moved toward the house, where a yellow glow of lamplight shone. Half way there, he halted suddenly, shrinking back into deeper shadows. Not far off, two men were talking—Vail Wayne and Flint DeVore. And, since it was apparent that they were talking about him, Monroe had no scruples about listening.

"Somethin' damn queer in her bringin' him here, where he used to figger to own the place," Vail was saying. "And he strikes

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me as the sort who'll cause a lot of trouble."

"You ought to know," DeVore chuckled. "After tanglin' with him yesterday."

"He packs a wallop like a mule's kick," Vail growled. "I'm sure aimin' to pay him back for that."

"You'll get the chance," DeVore promised. "Think I'm going to be kicked out by him? But we've got to watch our step for the next few days. After that, we'll have everything our way, and no stoppin' us."

"How's it comin'?" Vail demanded eagerly.

"Fine. Ever since you come, the deal's been, as you know, that half of the stock gets branded with her Pair o' Dice iron, and half with yore Lightnin' iron. She fell for that idea. Like you ordered, four out of every five, and sometimes more, have had yore iron burned on 'em. Well, small as her herd is now, this last deal will wipe the Pair o' Dice iron off the range, complete."

"You got it fixed?"

"Sure have. She thinks we're sellin' the extra stock. What's really happenin' is that we're sellin' her out, clean. Time the cattle are gone, it'll be too late to stop or save anything. That's why we need to act friendly with this Monroe till it's done. Keep 'em from gettin' suspicious. Then she loses the ranch, and you, with yore big herd that we've been holdin' off in the hills, can take over and have it stocked overnight. I—"

He stopped with a warning hiss. Someone was coming. But after a moment they saw, as did Monroe, that it was Sam Sugrue. Monroe had left him lying, knocked cold, but he had recovered in the interim, though he still acted a little groggy.

"What's wrong with you, Sam?" DeVore demanded, as Sugrue staggered and clutched at his arm for support. "Been drinkin' again?"

"No." Sugrue sounded angry. "He hit me—that damn Monroe—listen." His voice was urgent. "Know who I saw comin' up the road? Him!"

"You—yuh mean?" DeVore's voice was uncertain.

"Yeah, him!" Sugrue repeated. "I thought sure he was dead there, yesterday—lyin' out in the road, lookin' dead enough, his head bleedin' from my bullet. But here he comes walkin' along this evenin', and I got to him just in time."

So that was where he'd seen Sugrue be-

fore! He had been riding that horse yesterday, wearing that red bandana which the breeze had lifted for just an instant! And his bullet had creased this stranger, yesterday. Monroe had known from the first that there was something familiar about Sugrue.

"Where is he? What happened?" Vail jerked out.

"I'm tryin' to tell you," Sugrue protested. "I walked up to him and slugged him with my gun, knocked him cold. I was just going to finish the job when this damn Monroe jumps me—and knocks me cold. I just now come to—and both of 'em are gone!"

There was a moment of silence. Then DeVore ripped out an oath.

"I knew he was here to make trouble. We've got to find them both quickly!"

"Sure. But where are they? If they've got to her—"

"They haven't." Vail's voice was cold and incisive now. "I saw somebody go into that old shed a while ago. Looked like he was carryin' something. I couldn't see good, and I didn't pay much attention. But that must have been Monroe, carryin' him."

The three said nothing more. With a chill singleness of purpose, they started moving toward the old building, in silence. Monroe lost no time in heading there, too. If they found the other man there, they would finish murdering him. He had to get there first.

CHAPTER FOUR

Partners in Paradise

AS THOUGH the notion of haste had just come to them, they started to increase their pace. It was risk running and possible discovery now, or go cautiously and arrive too late. Monroe ran, and heard a startled ejaculation, then the whistle of lead as they shot at him. Silence might be desirable for what they were about, but they knew that they possessed numbers on their side, and this was urgent business.

Monroe reached the door, ducked through, and slammed it shut again. The building had been built strongly enough to stop bullets, and the door was a heavy one too, with a good bolt. There was only the one small, boarded-up window. For the

moment, it was fairly safe—but now he was trapped in here with the injured man.

Monroe heard them pound up and fumble at the door, then draw back a little, and an excited confab of other voices joined in. That shooting had attracted the attention of the crew. He saw then that the injured man was coming to, sitting up dazedly.

"How do you feel?" Monroe asked.

"Kind of woozy," the stranger admitted.

"I was hurt yesterday—"

Outside, Vail's voice rose sharply, questioning someone of the crew.

"You say she isn't in the house?"

"Nope. But don't get excited. She took her horse and rid off a spell ago. Headin' to visit her girl friend on the C-Bar-K, I reckon."

"Good. That means she won't be back for a couple of hours. We can have this job all finished up by then," Vail said with relief. He raised his voice again. "Inside there. You can come out, Monroe, and get out of this country—and stay. Or you can stay here—permanent. Take your choice!"

Monroe shrugged. He knew that regardless of his choice they aimed to kill him, he knew far too much.

"I reckon I'll stay right here," he said.

"Suit yourself," agreed Vail. "We'll leave you for a little while—but we'll be back."

EVIDENTLY most of them were returning to the house for something, perhaps to search for something now that Mary Lou was away. But someone would have been left on guard here, of course. He could have a try at getting out—and, if he were alone, he might stand a chance in a quick dash for cover.

But to go that way would mean leaving the stranger to die. And in his present shape, he couldn't make a run for it. To try and go, and carry him, would be inviting sure disaster. Monroe was startled as he heard a low, urgent voice.

"Let me in—quick!"

An instant later he had jerked the door open, and Mary Lou slipped in, while the surprised guard cursed and set up a yell for the house.

"I heard them," Mary Lou explained.

"And I took this chance. What—"

She had crossed to the injured man, who had struggled to his feet now and spoke:

"Mary Lou!"

"Who are you?" she demanded, trying to see him better in the dimness.

"Who?" he repeated, as if puzzled.

"Why, I—I'm your brother, Vail Wayne. Don't you know me, Mary Lou?"

"You? Vail?" Her voice was just above a whisper.

"Of course I'm Vail," he retorted, a little pettishly. "Though I don't wonder that you're surprised," he added.

"I know how it is, Mary Lou. You haven't seen me since you were four years old, of course. Mother took me, while you went with Dad. After they both died, I aimed to come to you here—three years ago. But I never got here."

"But—but he did—that man who claims to be my brother—"

"I know," the real Vail Wayne went on patiently. "I reckon he had the papers to prove it, and everything. I was startin' to join you then, and I was slugged and my papers stolen. And I suppose, him havin' them, you had to believe he was me."

"I—I did," Mary Lou agreed. "But I've had my doubts since. He—he never seemed like I thought you'd be—"

"He's a crook," Wayne said positively. "Of course, Paradise Ranch was a stake worth playin' for—or even only half of it. They slugged me and packed me off to an insane asylum in the east—a private one. I guess the folks there really thought I was crazy, too, for a while, the way I raved and took on. When I was allowed to write letters to you at the ranch, the answer came back that the real Vail Wayne was living here now, and that really did convince them that I was crazy—"

"I—I never saw such a letter," Mary Lou whispered. "But I remember now—he always managed to get hold of the mail first."

"Well, finally I quieted down and made them believe I was sane enough, under the name I'd been put in under. So they let me out. I started for the ranch. But they must have got wind of it somehow. Maybe the asylum wrote them that I was out. Yesterday the stage was held up, and I was shot—"

IT WAS clear enough to Monroe now. A gigantic play for the ranch, which had been cleverly and ruthlessly carried through to this point. That was why, fearful of her

foreman and even of the man who claimed to be her own brother, Mary Lou had written to the owner of the ranch where he'd been employed, a long way off, asking him to recommend a man to be foreman.

Monroe could hear men running outside. He heard Vail ask the guard what had happened. After a few moments of consultation, Vail called out:

"You know the truth now, Mary. You can do one of two things. Come out—and marry me. Or stay in and die with those two!"

Monroe realized how shrewd Vail was. As his wife, Mary Lou could not testify against him, and that would give Vail a clear title to the ranch. Though, it didn't make much difference now.

"Marry you?" Mary Lou retorted witheringly. "I'd die first!"

"Suit yourself," was the callous retort. "Either way, I get the ranch. And don't fool yourself that you *won't* be dyin'."

Again, there was silence for a little while. Monroe suddenly heard a low crackling sound. At the same moment he saw a reflected streak of light, caught the odor of smoke.

If it had been just himself, he might still chance making a run for it, but he had the Waynes to think of as well. The logs were tinder-dry, and would burn fast. If they stayed inside, they would roast. If they came out, with the fire lighting up the place while the others stayed hidden in the shadows, they would be shot down, helplessly. For having gone this far, all three of them must die and be destroyed in the ashes of this building. It would be fairly simple to explain Mary Lou's getting caught in it. As for Wayne and himself, they were strangers. No one else would even be sure that they had been on the ranch.

Or that was the way the trio figured it. In the light which reflected inside now, he saw Mary Lou, and her face, though pale, was steady.

"I'm awfully sorry that I got you into such a fix as this," she said.

"I've been in others—and got out," Monroe retorted. He picked up a shovel which stood in the corner, set to work. The soft, mucky ground was easy digging. By now, the heat was becoming oppressive, in here, the light was increasing so that he could see clearly. Flame licked through at one corner,

started to race ceilingwards. He saw the white, but still steady faces of Mary Lou and her brother as they watched him, not understanding. By now, the smoke was getting thick.

"Get down where you can breathe," Monroe said. "Close to the ground."

He had a fair-sized hole scooped out now. At his urging, they both crouched down in it. Working feverishly now, he dragged some of the planks, piled in one corner, laid them in a covering floor across the hole, shoveled dirt on top of them.

By then, the smoke was stinging, oppressive, the heat was beginning to sear his face, almost to singe his hair. Hastily, he crawled inside through a hole he had left, shoveled more dirt to fill it.

FOR the moment, they were safe enough. The whole building was becoming an inferno above them now, the heat, even in here, was getting bad. There was the chance that the mucky ground, piled a few inches thick above the planks, would prevent them from getting on fire, be sufficient insulation that they could live through it.

And there was the chance, now seeming equally strong, that if they stayed here, they would be roasted like a chicken wrapped in clay and buried in the embers of a camp fire.

Feverishly, handicapped by the darkness and lack of room, Monroe shoveled. It had been years since he had been here, still longer years since, as a boy, he'd seen that old wooden tile laid hereabouts. If his memory had played tricks on him now—

His shovel struck something, then he had found a half-rotten chunk of wood and ripped it away. Here was the old tile, which had formerly kept this swampy place drained. About three feet square. It was partly filled with muck which had collected and clogged it through the years, but beyond was a slimy hole, which at least led away from the inferno raging above them. He explained it hastily.

"They won't know about this," he said. "Crawl after me—but not too fast."

He led the way, still clutching the shovel in one hand. About every few feet he had to stop and dig some of the obstruction aside, but they were moving away from that intolerable heat and smoke. As the fire burnt itself out, with ashes covering everything and the heat keeping anyone from a close

investigation, the others would be certain that they had perished in the conflagration.

By now, the trio should have gone off to bed, with the fire dying down and night reclaiming the scene. Monroe dug upward, breaking a hole through the still swampy ground. The old planking was easy to dispose of. He scooped the muck aside and looked out.

It was much as he had expected, save that the fire still burned, giving off more or less light, and, though beyond the heat of it, he had come out just inside the radius of it. The moon was now up.

He crawled on out, stood up. It looked peaceful enough—

Someone gave a startled curse, and a bullet followed it, missing him by a scant fraction. Monroe spun about, and saw the pseudo Vail, still staring at him as if he was seeing a ghost, but taking no chances, even at that. Even as Monroe turned, a second bullet twitched through his shirt sleeve.

He dropped the shovel, jerking his own gun and firing. He saw Vail go down, knew that a gun was still thundering, and felt the hot, angry sting of lead twist through his left arm, then he saw Flint DeVore and lined his sights on him—saw DeVore stagger and sprawl, and knew that his own gun was empty, and that Sam Sugrue was bursting out of the shadows beyond, with the pale moonlight rippling along his own gun barrel.

And then Sugrue too, was down, and the night was suddenly calm again. Monroe turned, and looked at Mary Lou, standing beside him, muddy and disheveled but oddly calm, the gun in her hand with the smoke curling from the barrel, and they walked

across to where Sugrue was whimpering and trying to reach his dropped gun, and Monroe kicked it away from him.

"Thank God I didn't kill him—though he deserves it," Mary Lou gasped.

Monroe knew how she felt, and saw that Sugrue wasn't badly hurt, and tied him up. The others wouldn't bother them again.

"Where are the crew?" he demanded of Sugrue, as Wayne came up and looked at the man who had twice tried to murder him.

"They pulled out," Sugrue explained. "Didn't want to stay around when they saw what was going on."

That was understandable. Most men, hardcases such as that crew were, would join in a gun fight to the finish, against men. But when a woman was involved, and death by fire—that was another matter entirely.

It left the three of them to run things. "And make a new start," Mary Lou added. "Which we can do, now—thanks to you, Paul Monroe McKenzie. As partners."

"I'm just your foreman," he said, a little gruffly, old pride rising in him. "Just because the McKenzie's once owned Paradise Ranch, gives me no rights here—"

"As partners, Paul," she repeated firmly. "You had a right to feel cheated, as I told you before. I found out a lot of things, lately. Those three had a hand in trying to get this ranch, clear back when your father lost it. I'm not sure but what it really all belongs to you, if the full truth were known."

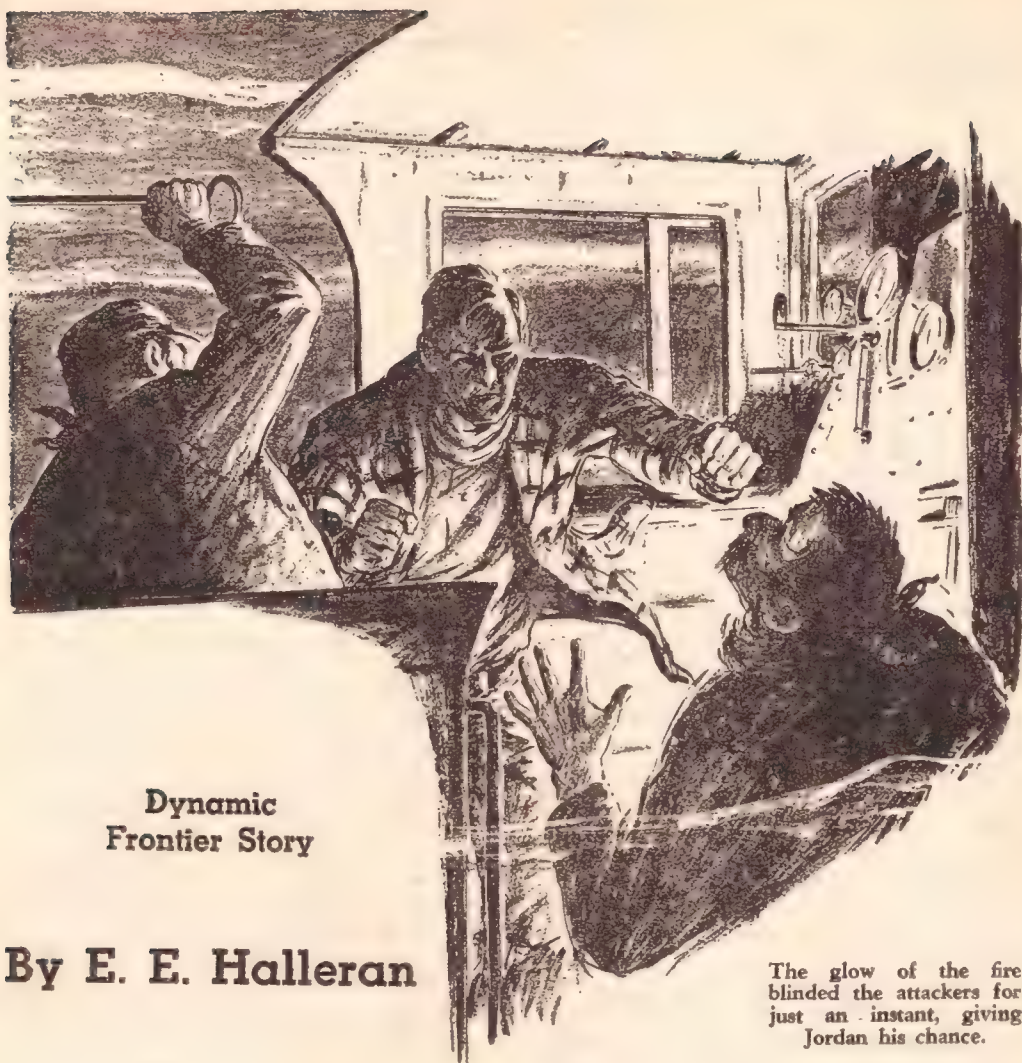
He looked at her, then, at the shine in her eyes as they met his under the moon, and, reading the promise in them, nodded.

"We won't go into what's past," he said. "But I guess I like it the way you said—as partners. Partners in Paradise!"

THE END

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Dynamic
Frontier Story

By E. E. Halleran

The glow of the fire
blinded the attackers for
just an instant, giving
Jordan his chance.

Trail-Blazers For Blizzard Steel

Tom Jordan paid little attention to the skeptics who sneeringly proclaimed, "You can't throw steel through Placer Gap in blizzard weather!" . . . But when the jeers were accompanied by threatening guns, he knew his reply must be made in but one kind of language — dynamite!

THE autumn wind stung sharply as Tom Jordan jumped down from the cab of the little woodburner. Below him the graded bank sloped abruptly toward the swift current of the river, while out ahead of the locomotive he could see the string of flatcars loaded with rails and ties. Sledges brought their staccato clamor to his ears and he took a deep, satisfied breath. It

did something for a man to see his careful plans being turned into reality by the swinging hammers of the construction crews.

He turned to grasp the arm of a wizened little man who was clambering down to the roadbed beside him. The little man pulled away almost sharply, his gray whiskers fluttering in the crisp wind as he objected, "I ain't no cripple, ye young whelp!"

Jordan grinned. "You'd better not be, Pop. I'm depending on you now. That's the rock, right there beyond where those rails are going down. How does it look?"

The little man studied the rugged mountain briefly, some of Jordan's smile reflecting itself in his wrinkled face. "I reckon ye picked a tough one, son. Let's have a closer look."

Jordan led the way up the track to where a burly man in laced boots and a mackinaw was coming to meet them. "Afternoon, Slater," he said casually, "Meet Pop Dietz. Pop, shake hands with Mike Slater, the Colorado Southern's construction superintendent. Maybe he can give you some information."

Slater's heavy brows almost met above his enormous nose. "About what?" he demanded suspiciously.

Jordan waited until the two had shaken hands briefly. He wasn't expecting to get much help from the construction boss. Slater had been sore ever since the railroad directors had voted to use the Warrior's Gorge route. Slater had advocated a wide swing to the north and it had irritated him to have Jordan's advice accepted instead of his own.

"About the blasting job," Jordan said quietly. "We're planning to tackle it soon."

Slater's eyebrows did some acrobatics as his frown gave way to surprise. "This winter?" he demanded. "You can't run a line through that notch in bad weather. You'd kill your men and bankrupt the company."

"Got to be done," Jordan told him. "We'll have to do it if we're going to beat the New Mexico Central to Placer Gap—and if we don't, we might as well give up right now."

"Like that, eh?" Slater grunted. "You pick a crazy line to build and then find out that the other fellows are going to beat us to the valley. Now you've got to save your skin at the expense of somebody else."

Jordan flushed but kept his voice even. "We've argued that before, Mike. My survey simply showed the shortest and best route into the valley. I had no way of knowing that the Central people would rush a spur line up to tap the valley first. The unexpected happened—and so we have to change our plans to meet this new emergency."

"Sounds good," Slater grunted, turning on his heel. "It's lucky for you that the big boys believe your stuff!"

Pop grinned slantwise at the younger man as they moved on toward the huge pinnacle which marked the end of the rail line. "Friendly feller," he observed dryly. "How much rock have we got to cut?"

"About an eighth of a mile. Then there's some loose shale and after that easy sloping valley."

"And you've got to git through right away"

"We sure do. The Central ran its rail to Pinon Pass and stopped work for the winter, thinking we'd do the same here. Pinon's an easier cut than this so we have to do winter work or lose out."

Dietz grinned again. "Then start round-in' up a crew. We gotta git busy."

AT DAYBREAK next morning a picked squad went to work. Pop issued crisp orders and soon his crew were at work with the drills, cutting an odd pattern of holes. Jordan had seen plenty of blasting operations as the rails moved up through the foothills but he realized quickly that Pop Dietz had a method all his own.

A pompous looking man in a tweed overcoat came up as he watched. "I hope you're not overestimating this dynamite man of yours, Jordan," he said soberly. "Cutting that ledge won't be easy. One wrong charge and we're ruined."

Jordan smiled slowly. "I'll bank on Pop," he said. "When he's done, there will be a solid ledge that will hold your train."

The stout man wagged his head grimly. "You'd better be right, young fellow. If he leaves a gap we'll have a bridge job that we can't possibly handle until spring."

Jordan did not reply, watching carefully as Pop made his final inspections of detonators and tamping. The little man waved the spectators back along the rail line, checking his wires as he moved back to the

spot where he had set up his hand dynamo. Grinning a little at Jordan he remarked calmly, "Here she goes."

He threw his weight on the handle and there was a dull roar from the cliff. Little rock flew and there was no such shattering effect as Jordan had expected. A small wedge of rock simply detached itself from the face of the cliff, toppled slowly for what seemed like a full minute and then disappeared into the gorge. The resulting cut was perfectly flat at the bottom—and precisely on a level with the roadbed survey.

The stout man beamed in happy amazement but Slater turned away abruptly and walked toward the work train. Jordan knew a brief uneasiness at the sight of those hunched shoulders. Mike Slater was not the man to have for an enemy—and Mike was undoubtedly angry. He had been outvoted on the matter of the rail line and now he was seeing a job done which he had pronounced impractical. Mike wouldn't feel too happy about this cut.

Within the next few weeks, Jordan found this doubt of Slater to be the only flaw in an otherwise happy picture. Pop's ledge crept steadily around the bulge of the cliff, every blast artistically perfect. Snow fell almost as soon as the work began but Jordan and Dietz did not let it bother them. Extra men kept the ledge clear and Pop redoubled his care, keeping his drillers at a routine which minimized the chance of accident. In spite of ice and snow the cut went steadily around the promontory.

Then the old man fell ill and Jordan abandoned the job pending his recovery. Within two days, Pop was well enough to protest. "Never git done this way," he complained. "Git a work car fixed up. I kin sleep in it as well as I kin in this drafty old hotel. You blast and I'll keep an eye on ye from the car."

Jordan protested but finally agreed. They established a headquarters in a cabin car at the end of the rail line, and as snow piled high in the canyons their wheeled home became a center of considerable attraction. The fame of the Warrior's Gorge job was spreading abroad and rail officials came to stare, sometimes even staying over night with the oddly assorted pair who were performing the miracle.

Public curiosity did something for the crew as well. The men developed a pride in

their unique position and before the winter was well under way two cars stood at the end of the track, the crew going down to Prairie City only on Saturday nights.

Pop didn't even seem to notice. He remained in his car all the time but without any trace of idleness. When he wasn't planning the next set of drill holes he was working at some of the endless electrical gadgets which amused him and helped him with his work. For three full weeks Jordan ran the job, much of the time without much help from Pop. He had picked up some of the old man's skill and the ledge continued to move up the valley, accurate enough so that only ballast was needed for the rail that was added from time to time.

THEN trouble announced itself with a loud bang. In the middle of the night an explosion rocked the cars, bringing half-clad men out into the bitter night. Jordan led them, gun in hand, but there was nothing to indicate damage. Only a scent of burned dynamite in the air.

It was not until morning that they were able to discern the ugly scar on the rocks at the river's edge. Jordan took one look and turned away. "I'm going to look up above, Pop. Feel able to handle the job today?"

Pop did. The younger man went back along the rail line and climbed to the summit of the cliff, finding a basis for his suspicions at once. "Somebody up there shoved a sled load of dynamite over the edge last night," he told the crew when he came back. "Lucky for us it hit a bulge and skipped out over the ledge."

A couple of the men shifted uneasily and one of them stepped forward. He was an ugly youngster with a flat nose and yellow teeth but his eyes were straightforward. "I reckon Murph and me might know somethin' about it. A couple of weeks ago we was in the Gem saloon and a feller got to talkin' to us about the job. Purty soon he come right out and offered us a hundred apiece to us if we'd drill some wrong holes and ruin the ledge."

Jordan frowned. "Why didn't you tell me?"

The young fellow squirmed uneasily. "We took the money and figured that nothin' would happen while they was waitin' for us to pull the stunt. We kinda thought

they'd make us some more plays and maybe we'd find out who was doin' it."

"And you didn't learn anything more? You don't know whose money you took?"

"Nope. We just took a hundred apiece to do some doublecrossin'—only we didn't tell him who we was goin' to double-cross."

Jordan let it go at that. The men were loyal, that was reasonably certain. Without doubt this was the beginning of a campaign to wreck the Colorado Southern's amazing construction job. That meant the rival Central outfit was ready to take any necessary steps to win the race.

The obvious counter measure was to post guards at vulnerable points and the matter was quickly taken care of by officials at Prairie City. Still Jordan knew that there would be no relaxation until the job was done. It meant thousands of dollars, to the Central, to keep them out of the valley. The Central would willingly spend part of that money to do it.

Winter construction work had been bad enough but the tension mounted daily as they waited for the next move. In the midst of the strain they approached the end of the solid rock. Ice and snow kept Pop from getting a good look at the mass of loose shale which lay beyond, but Jordan's notes were clear. The old man made his decision promptly. "We got to tunnel," he declared. "If we try to cut through that stuff we'll have a slide that we'll never clear up."

"What I expected," Jordan said. "We'll tunnel."

It was not so easy as that. The Prairie City offices complained of the expense and Jordan went down to argue, quickly discovering that it was Slater who had presented figures to show the cost of the job as

contrasted with a simple clearing program.

Two days later Jordan was back at the rail head, triumphant but grim. "We run the tunnel," he told Pop—"but it looks like the Central is beginning to spend money in important places. I can't prove it, but I'll wager that they supplied the figures Slater was waving around. They've hired him to talk us into doing the wrong thing."

"Hmmp!" Pop grunted. "Waste o' money."

"But not too pleasant. We can guard against outsiders but a picket line won't protect us from traitors within the camp."

THE tunnel went forward slowly, half of the crew operating as before while the other half mounted guard, permitting no one except their own gang to approach the scene of operations. Slater did not even put in an appearance in the gorge, and his very absence worried Jordan. Something big must be in preparation.

Nothing happened, however, and they were within a few feet of making their western opening when a late winter blizzard swept down upon them. It blocked everything, including the rail line and Jordan took comfort in the isolation. Guards on the cliffs had come in out of the storm but their presence up there was no longer needed. Enemies could not approach the canyon now.

On the second day of the storm an engine and a snow plow fought a way through to the gorge. To Jordan's surprise there was a passenger, General Manager MacMurdo. The stout man had laid aside his tweeds for a fur coat and boots, his excitement apparent as he came through the snowbanks to the cabin car.

"Did you break out of the tunnel yet?"

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Jordan grinned across at where Pop was working on one of his pet contraptions. "Not yet," he replied. "We'll probably see daylight tomorrow—if the snow isn't too deep."

"Good. I was afraid you'd be through already. We want to make it an occasion. We'll run a train up and have a regular ceremony with newspapermen and everything. It'll be worth a good deal to us."

"Dangerous," Jordan objected. "We don't know where the Central people will strike next."

MacMurdo smiled. "You're like a hen with her first brood of chicks. We'll have plenty of guards on hand. Come along. You and Dietz will be our headliners at tonight's dinner."

Jordan shook his head. "Pop isn't fit to make the trip and I know he'd prefer to have us both on hand in case anything breaks tonight."

"But what can happen? In this blizzard..."

"No dice. You throw the party; Pop and me will stay here. We're both interested in just one thing—getting this line into the valley. You handle the publicity and we'll stick to the job."

THE storm was still howling when darkness closed down. Pop locked his gadgets in their closet early, climbing wearily to his bunk while Jordan studied the charts of the upper valley. Pop was already asleep when the younger man looked up, conscious of a rumble deeper than the shriek of the wind in the gorge. It brought him up abruptly but then he realized that there was the suspicion of a glare seeping through the whirling snowflakes. An engine was coming up the grade.

Jordan waited tensely. Presently the headlight came to a halt a few feet short of their car. A man carrying a rifle came forward along the side of engine and Jordan met him at the door. He had his own gun ready.

"Note from Mr. MacMurdo," the man said. "I'm to take over for you here."

The note was brief, its even script the familiar handwriting of the Colorado Southern's chief:

Jordan:

Your presence imperative here tonight.

*Sending trusted guard to stay with Dietz.
Don't disappoint me.*

MacMurdo.

Jordan showed it to Pop and they exchanged glances. "Better go," the old man advised. "If the boss wants you bad enough to send an engine up here tonight, you hadn't oughta hold out on him. Go do yerself some good with the big bosses."

"And you don't think there's anything crooked about it?"

Pop snorted. "Sech as what? MacMurdo ain't sendin' out engines fer the opposition to use. Go ahead."

Jordan nodded dubiously and the guard seemed to interpret the motion. "Everything'll be all right," he remarked. "I'll keep a sharp eye fer anybody fool enough to be prowlin' around in this blizzard."

Pop helped Jordan pack a few clothes and then the young construction boss was out in the snow, struggling along toward the waiting locomotive. The fireman helped him into the cab and almost immediately the engine was backing down the grade. Some of Jordan's suspicions came back as he stared at the dark figure of the engineer. Somehow the man seemed strange—and Jordan felt certain that he knew every engineman on the road. Could it be that...?

He slid down from the fireman's seat where he had just climbed, starting across the cab. At once something hard jabbed into his back and the fireman barked, "Hold it, brother! Keep them hands away from yer pockets. Git 'em up!"

Jordan swore under his breath. So that was it! Somebody had sold out to the Central—somebody big enough to get away with taking a locomotive. Tonight, when no other approach could be made to Warrior's Gorge, a stolen locomotive had taken raiders in, and was bringing Ed Jordan out—deceived by a forged note.

He looked over his shoulder at the dim figure behind him. "What's the game?" he inquired mildly.

The man grunted. "Just keep the paws up. We don't want no bloodshed if we kin help it. That's why w're takin' sech good care of you."

"And what about Dietz?"

"I reckon he won't put up enough scrap to git hurt."

Jordan realized that the locomotive was

slowing down once more. Apparently the fireman would hold him at gun point until the engineer was free to tie him up. Then they would run back up the line to pick up the raiders—after the damage had been done. He had to move quickly if there was to be any chance of saving the ledge.

Suddenly his right arm came down and back, its swinging arc timed to work with the twist of his body. The elbow struck the gun which had been jammed beneath his shoulder blade, knocking it aside just a split second before its boom filled the night. The fireman cursed and tried to swing his weapon back into line but Jordan was too fast for him, lashing out with his left fist and groping for the gun with his right.

THERE was a clatter of metal as the gun dropped to the floor of the cab but there was no chance for Jordan to find it. Even as he stooped the engineer jumped him from behind. They went down together and there was a frantic struggle in the darkness. Then the fireman got back into the fight and there was a violent mixup as the driverless locomotive rolled on down the track.

Jordan lost all count of blows struck. All he knew was that he was taking some terrific punishment. The fact that he was dealing out a better brand was little consolation. Every minute was taking him farther from the place where he was now

needed. This fight could be disastrous regardless of its outcome.

Once an iron hand clamped upon his throat but it relaxed quickly as the two enemies became confused in the darkness and slugged each other. It gave Jordan his chance and he rolled clear, climbing to his feet even as the fireman shouted a protest at his confused partner. Jordan backed out of the tender, kicking the firebox door open with his heel as they came at him again. The glow of the fire blinded the attackers for just an instant, an instant long enough for Jordan to take a full swing at the nearer jaw.

This time he wasn't fighting shadows. The blow connected solidly and the man lurched sideways, disappearing into the night as he went flying from the engine. It cut the odds but the other man had seized a fire iron and was raising it as a war club.

There was no time to counter but Jordan did manage to dodge sideways, taking the heavy blow on his shoulder and arm. It knocked him down but as he fell his hand touched the cold barrel of a sixgun. Already his assailant was raising the poker for a finishing blow but Jordan rolled swiftly, ignoring the blinding stabs of pain from his shoulder. As he rolled he swept the gun into position and fired.

The iron bar clattered to the apron beside him but the man came with it. Jordan dragged himself to his knees, unable to use

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CARL KODAK

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his left arm at all. A quick examination told him that his enemy was dead and he turned abruptly to his next problem. He had to get the engine back up the grade to the rail end in time to help Pop.

He kicked the firebox door shut, hoping that the fire would last, and climbed to the engineer's seat. Reversing the little engine with one hand was no easy task but he managed it and presently was accelerating up the grade.

He opened the throttle wide, teeth set in mingled pain and determination. Still groggy from the beating he had taken he was not certain whether it was more important to save the rail line or to rescue Pop. One way or another he had to get back.

It seemed like hours before a bobbing light flickered ahead. That would be some of the devils, probably getting ready to set off the blast that would ruin a winter's work. Even as the rage welled up within him there was a brilliant flash in the snow filled sky, the concussion making itself felt against his ear drums in spite of the noise of the locomotive. The odd thing was the way it silhouetted the car in which he had spent the winter with Pop. A really damaging blast would not have been out in the open like that.

He eased the throttle down, handling the controls clumsily but effectively to halt the engine just short of the cabin car. No one moved anywhere in the light of the dim headlamp and he stuck the gun in his pocket as he slid down to the roadbed. Maybe this was another trap about to spring shut on him.

He could hear nothing but the howling of the gale as he struggled forward along the rock wall but then a man lurched toward him, cursing painfully. "That you, Sanders?" the man gasped. "Get lanterns—quick!"

"Get your hands up, Slater!" Jordan snapped. "It's not Sanders."

EVEN in the darkness he realized that the construction boss was trying to get a gun out of his pocket. Jordan did not hesitate. Driving in swiftly he used his own weapon as a club, swinging a solid blow to the side of the big man's head. Slater went down like a log and Jordan's quick examination told him that the man's

mackinaw was already soggy with blood.

There was no time for lengthy investigation and Jordan hurried by the fallen man, keeping an alert watch about him as he mounted the steps of the car. No sound came, however, and he opened the door swiftly.

"Pop! Are you in here?"

To his relief the old man's voice came promptly, almost querulously. "Where in heck would I be—all trussed up the way I am?"

Jordan ran toward the sound of the voice, working hastily with his one good hand at the knots which bound his friend. "What happened?" he asked.

Pop chuckled. "I ain't sure yet—but I reckon a few ambitious fellers sorta blew themselves up. I wasn't exactly in a good position to see but I figger there was four of 'em, includin' yer friend Slater."

"Go on. What happened?"

"Well, jest as soon as ye left that guard feller pulled his gun on me an' another plugugly sashayed in here to tell me how they was goin' to use our dynamite to blow up the ledge. The idea was to blast the tunnel so all the shale would run down in and leave us with a year's work. I didn't argue with 'em, jest handed out plenty o' wire, some dynamite and a hand dynamo. What they didn't know was that the hand generator I gave 'em was a trick one I'd been fixin' up fer jest sech a purpose. Sort of a booby trap. The wire connections was dummy style and the spark didn't run to nothin' except a couple o' sticks o' dynamite what was right in the sides o' the box. I reckon when they shoved down on the handle it sorta took 'em all apart."

A new rumble from down the valley told Jordan that the stolen locomotive had been reported. Another train was coming up. He loosened the final knot and sank back against the side of the car. "I ought to punch you in the eye, Pop," he said wearily. "Here I go getting myself half killed trying to save you and you didn't need any saving at all."

Pop chuckled in the darkness. "That's the way with you young pups," he commented. "Always wantin' to be the heroes and not wantin' us old fellers to have no fun. I wonder what Slater thinks happened to him?"

By
Lee
Floren



Robb stood in the
saloon doorway,
gun out. . . .

To Hell With Neighbors!

Honest Eagle Top folk swallowed their pride to ask a despised gunslick to destroy the bloody plague of sudden death. . . . But that ruthless gunman was not ready to serve people who had cast him out—even though it meant the drygulch murder of the only man he respected.

MACK WEBSTER left his herd at Cedar Spring and rode north. Two thoughts were uppermost in his mind. Neither of them, he reasoned, had an apparent solution. Jarda Monson was one of them. The dark haired beauty disturbed him greatly. Mack's other thought concerned his neighbors here on Eagle Top range.

As he rode into his Circle Cross ranch, his mother came from the kitchen, carrying

a pan of dishwater. She spilled the frothy liquid on the sun-baked earth. "Roundup finally over, Mack?"

He stepped down. "Yes, Mom. The boys are moving the cattle south to the railroad. Old Jim Carson rode into camp this morning. He told me that Marshal James was killed at Eagle Top." His voice was quiet.

"He was a Jackson man, son. And I guess he got in too deep."

"Did Jackson—or one of his gunmen—kill him?" Mack asked.

"I don't know, son. Nobody knows, I guess, except the man who killed him." Her deep eyes flashed. "Jarda Monson wants you to take the star, I guess."

"I won't carry it."

She made no reply and returned to the kitchen. Mack stared after her then he led his tired horse to the barn. He turned as the buggy wheeled over the hill, spinning against the low sun. Jarda Monson was driving the team and the sight of her brought warmth to him.

Two others rode on the high seat beside her. One was a gnarled oldster—about seventy. His life and his guns had drawn their patterns across his rugged face. The other was a boy of sixteen. Mack Webster looked at the youngster and thought, *I was like that once*. Yet it seemed so long ago.

"Hello, Mack," Jarda called out.

He nodded to the trio and asked, "How go things?"

Billy Swenson, the young lad replied, "Somebody'll have to kill Turk Robb or his boss, Con Jackson!"

"Don't you try it." Mack Webster's voice was stern. He looked at the old man. "How's things with you, Gun?"

The old man spat in the dust. "Gun!" He made his voice ironical and yet it was tired. "For fifty years—*Gun* Malone! And my real name, believe it or not, is *Fred* Malone! *Fred*! Hell of a name for a starman. Gun's better." He sobered, his aged eyes gleaming. "Marshal James was murdered last night. We want you to take the star."

Mack looked at this man who had held him on his knee and bought him his first rifle. He looked at Billy Swenson, who watched him closely. He, in turn, had helped Billy over his first bumps. For his father, Darb Webster, had raised Billy, after the youngster's folks had died. Now, the kid was on his first job, working for his old friend, Gun Malone, on Gun's little spread.

Slowly, he said, "No, Gun. I'm not wearing the star."

Marda was hurt, her eyes showed it.

Mack went on, "When you wear the star you walk down the center of the street. You walk out in the dust. You have to watch every alley and doorway and corner.

Maybe there's a man behind that corner waiting to kill you, and you have a small tight spot against your spine."

"There's more to it than that, Mack," Gun Malone said.

"What's that?"

"A man has neighbors. He can't—and he doesn't—live alone. He's got to meet and help those neighbors. They're part of his world. I ain't got enough words to say what I mean."

"Have my neighbors helped me, Gun?"

Jarda cut in. "Have you given them a chance?"

Mack Webster stood there, dark against the sun. They had gone all through this before.

"They ran me out of Eagle Top some six years ago. I was wild and tough, and I had my dad's temper—and I killed a few men. Gun, you asked me to leave."

Gun nodded. "You were too wild, Mack. Time would come and I would have to take my star against you. And I couldn't do that, so I asked you to leave." The old lawman was heavy with an unseen weight.

Mack leaned back against the barn. "I left, then, and a few years later, I took up the badge." He thought of Glasgow and Wolf Point and Deadwood and Cheyenne. Townsfolk walked those streets now because of him—and they walked those streets in peace. "Dad died six months ago and I came home. But my gun reputation followed me here. I was a killer, according to these people—my *neighbors*, you say! All right, I am a killer! Now they need me and they send for me!"

"They're afraid of you," Jarda said. "You're never warm with them, you're always aloof. They remember you left town against your will. And what is more, you never let them forget."

The four of them realized that there was no use of further discussion. Jarda turned the team.

Mack noticed for the first time that Billy wore a gun. He asked, "Did you give him that gun, Malone?"

"He's big enough," Malone replied.

Mack said, to Billy Swenson, "Take that thing off and leave it home after this."

Mack watched the buggy fork the rocky hill. Then he went into the barn. He stripped his tired horse, watered him and turned him into the creek pasture.

THAT night, he and the old hostler, Boot Judson, were playing seven-up in the bunkhouse. They were the only men on the ranch.

"Somebody's coming," said Boot.

Mack's hand fell up on his gun. Then he remembered and drew his hand up. "Come in," he called.

Con Jackson was a big man. He was boisterous on the surface, and steel underneath. He ran the Mint and the Scarlet Brand saloons and his outfit was the big Diamond N. He wanted Eagle Top town and Eagle Top range and he made no bones about voicing his desires.

"Hook up a chair," Mack invited.

Jackson remained standing. "Just riding through and thought I'd drop in." He was lying and both knew it. "You taking the marshal job?"

"No," Mack said. "By the way, why don't Turk Robb come in?"

Jackson studied him. "What do you mean?"

"Robb's outside. Tell him to come in."

"You've got good ears, Webster." He opened the door and called, "Come in."

Turk Robb was a bowlegged, weighty man. It was apparent that he had ridden hard trails.

Mack Webster felt the pull of anger. "When you hombres come around my Circle Cross, walk a straight line. Get it!"

Robb shrugged, seemingly indifferent. "Okay, Webster."

"We'll drift," murmured Jackson. "Just thought we'd ask, Webster."

They turned and walked out.

Judson asked, "Do you really mean that, Mack? Do you mean you aren't stepping in?"

"Dammit, no!"

The door opened and his mother came in. She had a dark shawl over her hair and that accentuated her grayness.

"Con Jackson was here, wasn't he? I thought that was him and Turk Robb that rode past the house?"

"That was them, mother."

Here eyes were searching. "Did you get in trouble with them, Mack?"

"No." He added, "This isn't my fight."

She said levelly, "I wouldn't be too sure about that."



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What you NEED is SLOAN'S LINIMENT

He felt wonderment, irritation. Were they seeing something he could not fathom? Were they looking beyond him and were they deeper than he? "I'm sure, mother." "Good night, son."

She left and he got to his feet. Something was inside, something was driving him, something was bitter. *Only two men know, he thought, and I am one and Gun Malone is the other. He's lived in a small room, too, alone in some dinky hotel. He's pulled the blinds low after locking the windows. He's jacked many a chair under the knob to sure the door, even after it was locked. They're afraid of me and despite that they ask for my help.*

Mack slept little that night.

NEXT morning he rode out, finding the herd at Kettleman Springs. The sun was hot, tireless. He said, "Move them slowly, boys, or they'll lose lots of fat." He was gripped with impatience and he swung north again.

At Willow Creek he met Turk Robb and Con Jackson. "You're off your range," he snarled.

"Cuttin' across country," murmured Jackson. "You got good range, here, Mack Webster, and if you want to sell. . ."

"Not for sale."

"You're blunt," growled Jackson.

"Sometimes," said Mack Webster, "you meet a man who understands only hard words or hot lead."

Turk Robb leaned back against the rim. He said, very slowly, "This rooster is ridin' a high horse, Jackson, and somebody'll front-foot his bronc some day and bust him in the dust."

Mack Webster had his hand on his gun. "Are you the man, Robb?"

Robb was the color of washed ashes. Con Jackson's face had fallen into stern lines. The gun slick was silent for a moment.

"Maybe I'm not," said Robb. He added, "And maybe I am."

Jackson came in. "Gun Malone's eatin' his heart out down there." He waved a blocky forearm toward Eagle Top, ten miles away. "He's a sick man. He's even asked Judge Carruthers to swear him in as marshal. The judge won't. Then that kid—Billy Swenson—he asked the judge. No dice there, either."

Mack Webster felt a tightness. "He's

just a kid," he said. "A fuzzy-faced kid. He'd better walk light."

"I told him that," said Turk Robb. "He tried to pick trouble with me."

"Stay away from him," Mack warned.

Jackson said, quickly, "We better get back to town, Robb," and they rode across the hills toward Eagle Top. Mack turned toward the Circle Cross, then drew in, and looked at the pair. They were riding at a high lope, drifting free with the wind. He, too, rode toward town. But he rode at a long running-walk.

At Big Rock, he met a rancher and his family. The man lifted a hand slightly, the woman nodded.

These people avoided him. The same was true when he met the three riders on Pine Ridge. He had gone to school with all of them years before. But they only nodded to him as he rode by.

He nodded back, briefly, and rode into Eagle Top.

AS USUAL, the old hostler was drunk. He sat on the ground asleep with his bearded head on his thin chest. Mack put his horse in a stall and pitched hay in the manger. The sun was reaching noon now.

This was the slack hour before dinner. He headed for Jarda's restaurant. She was checking morning receipts when he came in. He saw the bright happiness run across her eyes.

"Are you hungry, Mack?"

"Long time since daybreak. And a long ride from here to Kettleman Springs."

"Robb and Jackson must have been out that way," said Jarda. "They came in about twenty minutes ago, ate, and went up the street."

"I saw them out there."

She went back into the kitchen. When she came out she had his meal. The coffee was good and the steak turned just right. She resumed her work and was silent. Jack Smythe, the N Bar C foreman, came in, spun a stool and sat down.

"Howdy, Mack."

Mack nodded.

Jack ordered and was thoughtfully silent. Then he turned and said to Mack, "Gun Malone is down to the Black Spider, Mack, and he's drinking. You should go down there, Mack."

"Why?"

Smythe glanced at his coffee. "The kid is with him. The kid is drinking, too. I saw him sneak out back where he has a bottle hid. They both carry guns and Turk Robb and Con Jackson are across the street in the Mint."

Mack left the restaurant abruptly and headed for the saloon.

Gun Malone was alone at the bar. Billy Swenson was sitting at a card table.

Gun Malone lifted dreary, whiskey eyes. "You're damned right I'd do that," he mumbled. "Have a drink, Mack." He shoved the quart along the bar.

Mack pushed it aside. "What's the occasion, Gun?" he asked.

Gun Malone lifted his scrawny, gnarled right hand. "Whiskey will make those fingers quiet. It will still those nerves. Whiskey does that, you know."

"We'd better get out of here," Mack said as he laid his hand on the oldster's shoulder, and the scrawny hand pushed it slowly aside. There was a hidden strength in this old man, and only death would conquer it.

"Take your hand off me!"

He let his hand fall. "I'm sorry, Gun."

He turned and moved outside. Impatience tugged at him. The men on the street greeted him with short nods, few words.

The supper trade was in Jarda's restaurant and Mack walked by. Turk Robb came out of the Mint. He looked at him, briefly, nodded and went back. His gait was that of a horseman on foot, rolling and swaggering. Mack followed him inside.

Jackson hooked his elbows back over the bar railing. "Drink, Webster?"

Mack shook his head.

Jackson said smoothly, "This town is very uneasy tonight."

"Gun Malone is drunk across the street," Mack said. "So is Billy Swenson. Gun's making a little fight talk against you. He's an old man, Jackson, and whiskey's got him."

Jackson said, gruffly, "If he comes in and makes trouble, one of us will have to take care of him."

MACK returned to Jarda's. He took a seat and ordered. The food had no taste for him.

Jarda asked, "Did you see Gun?"

"I talked to him," he replied.

"Do you think it did any good?"

He said, wearily, "I don't know."

He ate, mind busy. Maybe, he told himself, if he didn't owe anything to this town, he did owe something to aged Gun Malone. He owed him the respect and obedience due an old person who had helped him and his father by keeping a raw land in line. He paid for his meal and went out into the night.

Three boys were playing marbles under the kerosene lamp. He went up to one and said, "Gun Malone is in that saloon. Tell him to meet me in the back—real pronto." He flipped the youngster a quarter.

The kid caught it, and went off.

Mack moved into the alley. He leaned against a tree, solid in the darkness. A few minutes ticked by and soon Gun Malone lurched out, his shadow running ahead of him and then dying at the door closed behind him.

"Mack?"

"Here, Gun."

Mack grabbed him. He twisted the oldster around, clamped a hand over his mouth. Old Gun twisted, tried to fight back. Mack held him. Just then Billy Swenson stuck his head out the back door.

"Gun. Hey, Gun. Where are you?"

Mack held the old man silent.

Billy called again and then turned back into the saloon, and the door closed. "I ought to take you to jail," said Mack, huskily. "But I haven't got any way to get into the place. So I guess I'll gag you and tie you until morning."

Mack took his handkerchief and crammed it into the drunken man's mouth. He tied a scarf over that. Then with Gun's suspenders, he tied him hand and foot, and rolled him into a shed. He went out in the alley, closing the door behind him.

It was then that the gunfire rocked across the town.

He halted, listening, wondering.

The firing died. Men were moving, calling, out on the main stem. He went forward and saw them gathered around in front of the Mint. He went through them and saw Billy Swenson lying in the dust.

"What happened?" Mack demanded.

"He went into the Mint," said a man, "and he called Turk Robb. He was drunk, and he said something about 'what have

you done to Gun Malone?" Didn't make sense to me."

Mack considered carefully. He understood. Billy Swenson had thought Robb and Jackson had lured Gun Malone back in the alley. So he had gone to the Mint to check up and gun talk had followed. He looked up at Robb, who stood in the saloon's doorway, gun out.

Robb turned and walked back into the saloon.

THE doctor came and made his examination. He finally said, "He should pull through;" and added slowly, "better get him to my office. When Gun Malone hears of this there'll be hell to pay. He thinks a lot of this kid."

Mack realized that he was responsible for all this. He had lured Gun out of the saloon. He felt a hand pull his sleeve. Jarda's eyes were tear-stained.

"Mack, when Gun hears of this—"

"He won't do a thing, Jarda," he said. She understood, then; and her eyes lighted. "You mean you intend to—?"

"Where's Judge Carruthers?"

"Here." The lanky judge came through the crowd.

Mack said, "Billy Swenson was my friend. I'm the one who got Gun Malone out of the way, not Robb and Jackson. He's in a shed behind the saloon."

Mack looked over the assembled crowd. Men were watching him, their eyes bright; a woman laughed hysterically and said, "Damn it, Mack, we just knew you'd come out, we just did."

"Hush, Millie," a man said.

A man said, "No, by hell, Mack ain't taking it alone. I'm going in there with him, 'cause this is my fight, too—I got a growing boy. He ain't fightin' my battle; I'm sidin' him."

Mack said, "Thanks, Joe, but I'll take it alone." He felt something inside of him, he felt it grow.

"You better do as Mack says," added another man. "You got Jennie and your family. Now me, I'm single. I'll drift around to the back, Mack, old neighbor."

Judge Carruthers swore them in. Then, while Martin went to the back, Mack entered the front door. Jackson and Robb had heard the talk outside. They stood there

against the long bar, their hands on holstered guns.

Mack Webster thought, *This scene is old and familiar.* . . . He said, "You're under arrest, the both of you."

Robb said, cynically, "Yeah. . . ."

"You carry their fight," said Jackson savagely, "and they hate you!"

Mack asked, "Are you coming, or do we have to carry you?" He was waiting for Martin. Outside, he heard a man stumble in the dark, heard a man fall. Turk Robb's thin lips broke in a tight smile. "Hell of a help he's got. . . ." he murmured, and then he was reaching.

Mack shot first.

Robb ran true to pattern. His knees went out. Mack swung his gun on Con Jackson, then held his prongs. For Jackson was falling, slipping down, slugged lethally across the belly. Mack lifted his eyes, and surprise flared across them.

"Gun Malone," he said.

Old Gun held a shotgun. "I got myself loose," he said sharply. "I slugged Martin outside and he hit the ground hard as hell. How's the kid, Mack?"

"He'll be all right. But where did you get that scattergun?"

"Borrowed it . . . in a saloon."

Mack was a little sick. He leaned against the bar. *This is the sixth I've killed and I hope it is the last.* Larry Hopwood came up and said, with genuine fear in his eyes, "Are you all right, Mack?"

"All right, Larry."

Larry drew back. "We can never thank you enough, Mack. When law and order disappears—when young boys get shot down—" He fumbled for words.

Mack looked over the group. They were silent, struck by the moment's sincerity, and they were gratefully thankful.

Mack said suddenly, "Let's go across the street and all take a drink."

They thronged across the street. A man said, "No more for old Gun," and another man called, "That's right, no more liquor for old Gun!" They were laughing and joking, and Mack was laughing too. And when Jarda came into the saloon, there was a mad gay twinkle in his usually somber eyes.

"You were right," he said. "It was me, not them."

Red Trail Along the Powder

By Jhan Robbins

Nels Story, frontier trail-blazer, solemnly pledged: "I'm takin' you men out, and I promise I'll bring you back!" And then those trail-weary cowpokes found themselves surrounded by a thousand scalp-hunting savages!



In the rocky hillsides, Story and his men fought back.

NELS STORY reined in his horse and drew over to the side of the trail, the flaming red hair cropped close to his scalp, felt prickly and the back of his neck was suddenly cold. His mount nickered uneasily. Knifing through the sweet prairie air and the warm, musty smell of the herd

of cattle behind him was a sharp, acrid odor. "Something burning," he muttered, shifting in his dusty saddle. And then he saw it. A thin wisp of smoke rose from a blackened, smouldering stake. Around the heap of gray ashes the long prairie grass was pounded down in a broad circle. Many men and

horses were here yesterday, read the signs; many men, and here one died.

"No use lookin' any more for Davis," said a low voice. Quietly, Jim "Irish" McQueeney, Story's number one man, had ridden up behind him. In slow agreement, Story nodded his head.

While the great herd of bawling long-horns moved slowly past them, the two stood quietly where the trail had ended for laughing, daring, hard-riding Johnny Davis. One by one, Story's fifteen cowpunchers rode up and joined them. Their faces were dark and grim.

"Ready to bolt," Story thought. He met their unspoken challenge head-on. "Well?" he said, asking for a flat answer. In all their ears rang the final words of the nervous little army colonel at Fort Kearny. The colonel had forbidden them to ride into this flaming Indian country.

"It's certain death," he told them. They had defied him. When they eluded his soldiers and clattered impudently past his headquarters in the early dawn, the hysterical colonel had sprung from his bunk and rushed to the window. He screamed:

"You're dead men! All of you! Dead men!" They had laughed, then, because the dignified West Pointer was wearing a ridiculous peaked nightcap on his agitated head.

But they weren't laughing now. They were ten whole days west of Fort Kearny, with its thick stockade and its swarming blue uniforms. In the night there had been a shower of arrows, a fusillade of shots, a few triumphant war whoops and Johnny Davis had disappeared. Now they knew what had happened to him. Now each man moved his lean, tough body uneasily, already feeling a Sioux arrow quivering between his shoulder blades.

John Catlin was the first to speak. "What are you aimin' to do?" he queried.

"I'm askin' you that," Story answered soberly, "what do you say, Catlin?"

"I ain't afraid of no twenty Sioux," Catlin answered easily, "an' I ain't afraid of no two-hundred-twenty Sioux. But, Nels, from the looks of things I'd say that up ahead there was closer to two thousand."

"Well, Catlin," gruff old McQueeney sniffed, "they ain't all a-lookin' for you." The men laughed and some of the tension lifted.

McQueeney, pulling for his partner, spoke rapidly, seizing his chance:

"Who's afraid? Who wants to go back? Speak up now." There was an uncomfortable silence. These hard men hadn't kept their scalps this long by being damn fools and taking fool chances. One man voiced the general sentiment,

"I'll stay if the rest do. If all of us stick, we might make it."

Then there was a disagreeable whine from a man named George Dow, "Make it? We haven't got a chance. Look at poor old Johnny. We mighty near can't make it back to the Fort, let alone beat up the Powder River to Virginia City. Do you know that's thirty days hard ridin' away? And I'll lay you that whole valley is so full of whizzing arrows you can't see between 'em!"

IT WAS a tight minute. If Dow ran, they'd probably all go. Story's record shows he was a just man, and he probably didn't want blood on his hands, especially unwilling blood. But he had a big stake in that herd . . . forty thousand dollars worth of beef on-the-hoof. Virginia City, gold-rich and beef-hungry waiting at the other end of the valley. And at Virginia City, his pretty wife, and a son he'd never seen.

Story added the score swiftly in his vibrant, fighter's mind. Then his sixgun flashed silver and blue in the hot sun and George Dow was framed in its steely sights.

"Pull your horse, Dow," he snapped, "you're goin' to Virginia City whether you like it or not. The rest said they were willin'—you heard 'em—and I reckon you'll string along with the herd."

Slowly, Dow turned his horse. Slowly, he started up the trail. The crack of lariats against cowhide could be heard as the other cowboys scattered to pull in the wandering cattle and urge them toward the valley up ahead.

All that day, Story kept his gun at Dow's back. They made fifteen miles by nightfall. Story felt he had the situation well in hand. He sheathed his gun.

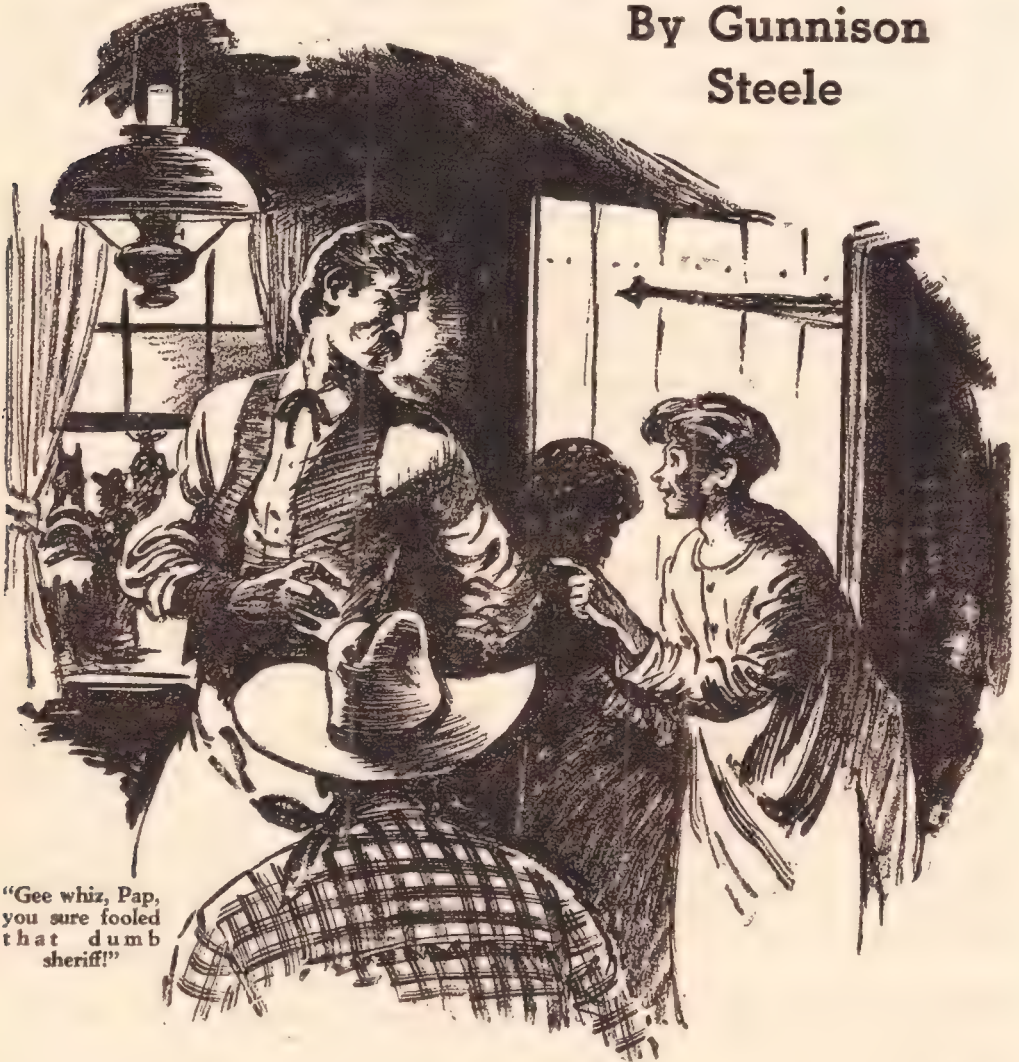
"You can head back now, if you want to," he told the sullen Dow, confident that none of the men would follow him. He turned to the cowboys, who were munching bisquit and gravy with one hand on their long

(Continued on page 97)

Word of a Man

Sure, Pap is a fine man—don't folks call him "Honest John?" . . . But I told Pap I'd rather be like Dick Sears, who was so smart at pretty near everything—rustlin', gamblin'—and even killin'!

By Gunnison
Steele



"Gee whiz, Pap, you sure fooled that dumb sheriff!"

I 'LL never forget that night. I'd gone to bed early, but it was hot and quiet, and I'd got to watching the red lightning racing along the dark horizon. Pap, in the next room, thought I'd been asleep a long time.

I figure it was about midnight when I heard the hard-running horse out there

in the night. The sound came right up to the front of our house, and stopped. I heard a voice call out, and Pap's footsteps as he moved to the door, and then I could hear his and the other man's voices.

I heard Pap say sharply, "That was a crazy thing to do, Dick! You know how I feel about killing!"

The other voice said, "He recognized me, I tell you—I had to do it! You've got to help me, John!"

The door closed and I knew they had come into the house. I could hear their voices, arguing. Pap's voice was sharp, angry—the other one wheedling, scared. The other man, I knew, was Dick Sears. Sears owned the Slash T outfit next to ours. He was a big, handsome man who wore loud, fancy clothes.

I was wide awake now, and I was curious to know what was up. The door leading into the front room was open a crack, and I eased off the bed, sneaked across the room and peeped through.

Dick Sears was slumped in a chair and Pap stood in the center of the room. Pap was a tall man, not handsome like Sears, but with a kind of square face and hair that had got gray in it from all the trouble he'd had. I could tell he was mad as a hornet at something Dick Sears had done.

"You'll help me, all right," Sears said. "Remember, if I get into trouble, you do too. You forgettin' all them cattle you helped me rustle."

"I'm not forgettin'." Pap looked pale and desperate. "But there's a big difference between rustlin' a few cows and killin' a man."

"I didn't go to kill him! But I can't see that it's any more wicked to hold a gun on a man and take his money than to steal his cattle in the dark."

"Well, maybe it's not," Pap said slowly. "You know why I agreed to go in with you in the first place, Dick. Helen was sick—she'd been sick for two years, and I *had* to have money. So I agreed to let you drive stolen cattle across my land."

MOM had died a year ago. I remembered the days and nights she'd lain there on the bed, pale and helpless, but always smiling when I was around. She was a mighty brave and pretty woman.

"You helped me on a lot of those drives, too," Sears reminded.

Pap said harshly, "I know I'm guilty! I done it for Helen, to start with, and since she died I've just kind of drifted, lacking the spirit to break it off. Then I was in debt, and the button needed a lot of things."

"It'd be kind of hard on the yonker if you went to the pen," Dick Sears said sly-

ly. "After all, I ain't askin' much of you."

"Just that I help a killer escape justice," Pap said bitterly. "I went along with you on the rustlin', Sears, but I told you I wouldn't stand for any blood-lettin'!"

"I told you it couldn't be avoided! All I ask is that when the sheriff comes you stand up for me. Just swear that I've been right here with you since sundown, that's all. You've got a good reputation, you've never been known to lie. They'll say Sam Trotter must have been mistaken—it'll clear me."

They talked on. Pap was in a tight place. He wasn't smart like Dick Sears, but I could see now that he'd been pretty slick to get by with rustling for three years without being suspected. "Honest John" Sargent, folks called him. That was a good joke.

I heard other horses outside. Pap and Sears heard them, too, and I could see that now they sat across a table from each other, with cards and some money and two glasses on the table.

The horses stopped outside. Somebody rapped on the door, and when Pap opened it, three men stepped into the room quick. One of them was Sheriff Jim Crew, a dried-up little man with gray mustaches, and the other two were his deputies.

"What's the trouble, Sheriff?" Pap asked.

"There's been a killin', John," said the sheriff. "About an hour ago Sam Trotter was held up on the trail a mile west of town and robbed of a thousand dollars in cow money. Then the bandit shot him from the saddle in cold blood. Some riders close by heard the shot, and when they got to him Sam was still alive. He lived just long enough to claim it was Dick Sears who'd robbed and shot him!"

"What!" Sears got to his feet quick. "You must be jokin', sheriff!"

"It's not a joke! Sam claimed he saw you plain in the moonlight. So, unless you can prove otherwise, I'll have to arrest you and charge you with murder."

Dick Sears looked kind of dazed and hurt. He certainly put on a good act.

"Why, sure I can prove otherwise," he said. "If I'd been right here with John Sargent ever since sundown, playin' poker and talkin', that'd prove I'm innocent, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, I reckon it would." Jim Crew turned and looked at Pap, and you could tell he'd put a lot of store in what Pap said. "What about it, John?"

Pap hesitated, his face pale and still.

"Why, that's right, Sheriff," Pap said slowly. "Dick couldn't of done it. He's been right here with me since dark."

The room got awful quiet. Dick Sears was smiling a little. The sheriff seemed to be thinking about what Pap had said. Then he nodded slowly.

"Sam must of been mistaken," he said. "He'd been drinkin' some before he left town. I reckon that clears Sears. Whatever you say is good enough for me, John."

The sheriff and his deputies turned and went out.

I COULDN'T stand it any longer. I opened the door and ran into the room, nightgown and all. Dick Sears was laughing, and he said, "All lawmen are dumb as mud!" Pap looked kind of sick.

"Gee whiz, Pap, that sure was slick!" I said. "Boy did you fool that dumb sheriff!"

Pap turned slowly and stared at me. Finally he said, "I thought you was asleep, Thadders."

I said, "I was awake—I heard it all. It takes brains to put something like that over!"

All at once, like he was just waking up, Pap jumped over and grabbed me. He shook me till I thought my teeth would drop out. I'd never seen him so mad before.

"Hush such talk, Thaddeus!" he said fiercely. "It ain't smart to fool the law, to rustle and rob and kill. It's dumb—it's bad and rotten. You hear me?"

"But, jeepers, Pap," I moaned. "Dick Sears dresses fancy and makes a lot of money. He's—"

"He's bad and rotten, too, plumb to the core! Get such thoughts out of your mind, before they poison and rot you, too!"

"Now, hold on there, John," Dick Sears blustered. "You've no right to—"

Pap turned loose of me, and he hit Dick Sears. It knocked Sears back against the wall, and to his knees, blood coming from his nose. Sears looked up at Pap, his eyes black and wicked, and then he reached for his gun.

Pap hit him again. Sears slammed against the wall again and rolled to the floor, dropping his gun, and Pap stooped and picked it up. Sears lay there moaning.

Pap strode to the door and opened it. The sheriff and his two deputies were just starting to ride away in the moonlight.

"Just a minute, Sheriff!" Pap's voice was loud and clear, with a kind of ring to it. "I reckon you'll have company on the ride back to town!"



HOT-LEAD AND BLOOD —DON'T MIX!

When the hardcase Tumbling K ramrod and his gun-hung waddies warned, "Nesters, get out—or die," one frontier drummer, Charley Cornish realized that he too, must take a hand in the deadly bushwhack war that must soon destroy the honest, God-fearing families of that once-peaceful valley. . . . Yet the only card he held—was a few hundred yards of hated and feared barb wire!

Don't miss Clifford D. Simak's roaring novel of die-hard cowmen—

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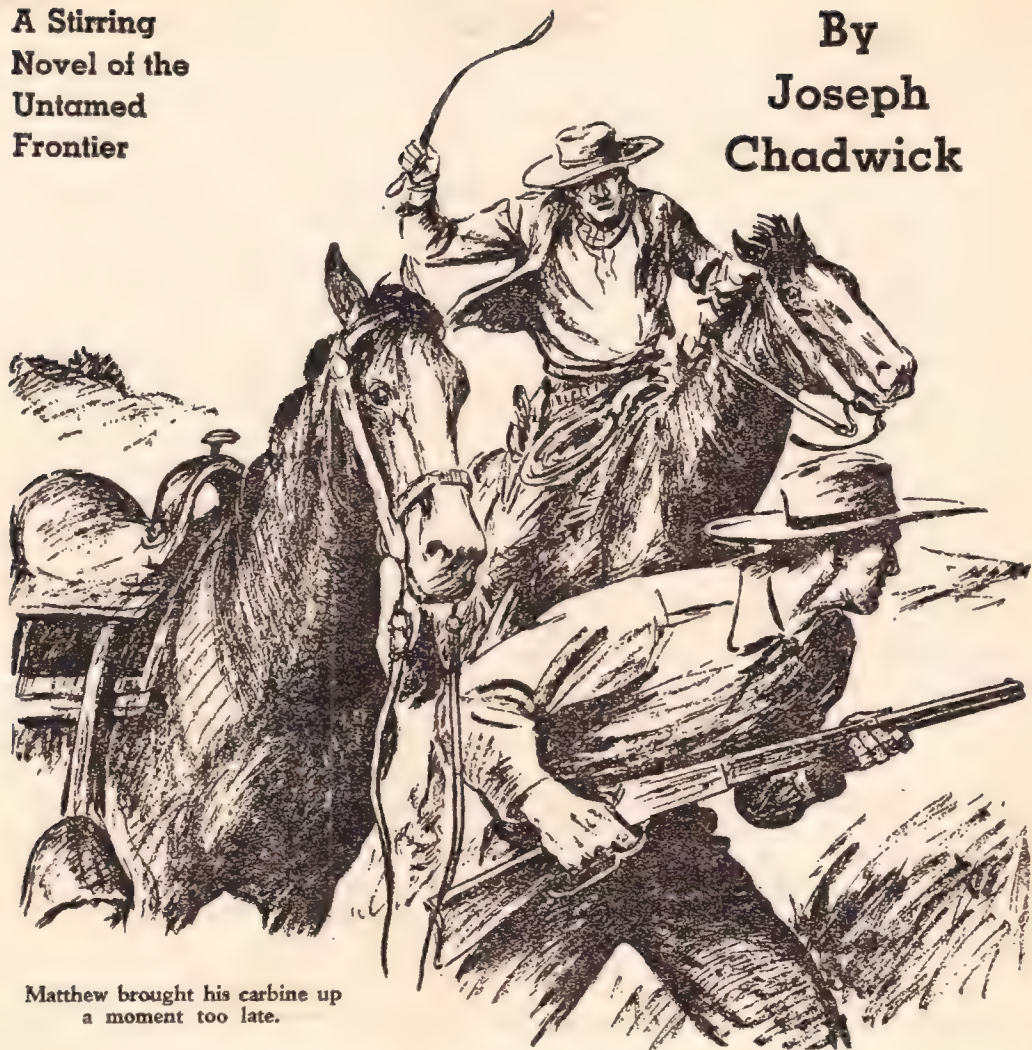
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Matthew brought his carbine up
a moment too late.

CHAPTER ONE

The Devil's Mission

ONCE, in the dim past, the ancient adobe buildings now housing the Estado Indian Agency had been a Spanish mission. But the good friars and all their work were dust these hundred years and more, and time had given the buildings a new name—The Devil's Mission.

Many dark and strange things had happened there, so that now most men shunned it with barbaric superstition. Did not the Devil dwell there?

That, young Matthew Kerrigan—late of Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love—

did not know. He knew little, and cared less, of the mission's mouldy history. Adobe walls showing the black stain of fire, an iron-banded door from which a knife might pry leaden slugs. . . . Who cared? The past was dead, and the present was bad enough.

Matthew Kerrigan sat writing a report for the Indian Bureau. His pen scratched noisily in the quiet dimness of the ancient room; the pen scratched only by spells, and in between Matthew sat frowning in thought. Being an Indian Agent was an exceedingly dull job. A job? Rather, it was exile. Banishment. Three months ago, Matthew's stern visaged father had said, "We'll put you where the dogs won't bite!"

Born to Gunsmoke!



Why should the tenderfoot Matthew Kerrigan try to stem the blood-mad onslaught of a vengeful redskin tribe? For the only reward possible was either an arrow-studded ticket to the Happy Hunting Grounds, or slow disintegration behind prison bars!

Meaning: "We'll put you where you'll cause your family no more trouble."

It had been an ultimatum: The Estado Agency—or prison."

Kerrigan's thoughts were broken by a man's loud hacking cough. It was Len Cruthers, the agency's store clerk. He was a pale thin man—a lunger. He had a beak-like nose, a pair black and too-bright eyes. Cruthers' eyes were now excited, and he said, "Mr. Kerrigan, sir—there's trouble at the school."

Matthew threw aside his pen, shoved back his chair and rose from the oak table that served as his desk. Trouble at the school. There was always trouble at Estado.

"An Apache kid threw a book at the schoolmarm," the store clerk wheezed out slowly.

Matthew took up his hat; it was a broad-brimmed black hat with a flat crown, for he was gradually changing from city clothes to Western attire. He strode from the house, Len Cruthers making way for him. He noticed an odd glint of expectation in the storekeeper's eyes, and understood it. Cruthers was always hoping that the agent would meet up with trouble he could not handle.

ACROSS the mission's walled enclosure, the prim Miss Agatha was pulling one of her reluctant Indian pupils from the an-

cient chapel which served as the schoolhouse. Matthew started toward the angry teacher and the yelling boy, but then halted as a wild Apache yell rang out.

A rider was splashing his mare across Rondo Creek and making for the agency, some urgency driving him. He rode bareback, and he kept kicking his mount with his heels. He wore the usual red flannel band about his head, in the Apache style, and his moccasins were the customary boot topped. His nakedness was partially covered by a breech-clout and a white man's shirt. Matthew recognized him as a buck called Pina. The Apache pulled hard on his rope halter, jerking the mare to an abrupt stop. His black eyes glittered with excitement, and he started a harangue in his guttural native tongue.

Luke Adams, the agency's blacksmith-carpenter and all-around handyman, came running from his shop. "What's he saying, Luke?" Matthew asked. The Indian Agent could not yet understand the Apache dialect.

Big, burly, blackbearded, Luke Adams interpreted, "This buck says there's a big band of white men headed into the reservation to make war on the tribe. He claims it's Jess Worth and his Rancho del Sol crew. I'm thinking he's telling the truth. Jess Worth has been threatening to come into the reservation and teach these Estado bucks a lesson. Worth claims they keep jumping the reservation and raiding his Sun Ranch."

Matthew had met Jess Worth. He was a big, loud mouthed rancher who seemed to consider himself something of a tin god.

The Apache was talking again, and Luke Adams translated his words.

"Pina, here, says he's going to round up the tribe. It means a fight, Kerrigan—unless you stop that Sun Ranch outfit." He eyed Matthew doubtfully, as though sure in his mind that the Sun Ranch outfit could not be stopped. "Even then it might not stop bloodshed. If this buck spreads the news. . ."

Matthew already had seen that. There were at least three hundred Apaches warriors on the reservation, some of whom at times stole away to join up with Geronimo's marauding bands. War was their heritage. Suddenly Matthew Kerrigan felt inadequate, and he could understand why

Luke Adams—and the other agency whites—doubted him. He had no confidence in himself.

But he said, "Keep him talking, Luke. I'm going to keep him from spreading the news. Don't let him ride away!"

Luke Adams said quietly, "Watch him. He's armed with a knife."

He started asking more questions of the Apache, and Matthew edged close to the mounted buck. Pina shot one suspicious glance at Matthew, but he was too slow in realizing what was happening. Matthew jumped at him and pulled him from the mare. For Matthew, it was like taking hold of a wildcat. The Apache twisted fiercely about the instant his moccasined feet gripped the ground. The squat face lighted with fury, teeth were bared in an animal snarl, and a naked blade glinted in the sun.

And Matthew Kerrigan, late of a civilized world, fought for his life against a creature as savage as Nature itself.

THE knife point slashed along the agent's arm, jabbed at his left side, tried to find his throat. He was tripped, thrown over backwards by the weight of the Apache's body. They rolled on the ground, straining against each other—Matthew fighting to keep clear of that knife, the Apache fighting to drive it into a vital spot.

The dust roiled up. They fought silently, except for their grunts and their labored breathing. The Apache clung like a leech, intent only in killing. Matthew a moment before had thought he had nothing to live for, yet now he fought for that very life.

He got a grip on the Apache's knife arm. He wrapped his long legs about the Apache's middle, and applied a quick pressure. He squeezed with all his strength, until the Apache's black eyes bulged and great veins stood swollen against the dusky temples. For a moment, Matthew had his chance but then the Apache's left hand drove at his eyes—gouging. Matthew pushed him off and rose to a crouch. The Apache shot up too, like a rebounding spring, and came rushing with the knife. Back East, Matthew had boxed for sport. He boxed now, for his life. He knocked aside the Apache's knife arm, stepped in close, and struck a blow that struck squarely on the chin. With a groan, the Apache slumped to the ground unconscious.

Over at the school, the Apache children had broken class and poured out to watch. Their teacher was watching too, her pinched face blanched. Len Cruthers stood over by the agency door, his eyes brighter than ever. Luke Adams' wife, Maggie, who was the agency cook and housekeeper, came hurrying from the kitchen. Jim, the Adams' thirteen-year-old boy, came running.

Matthew stared at them vaguely. Not one of them had offered a hand. He could have been killed for all they cared.

Yet there was here a reluctant respect in the eyes of the people watching him. Matthew's closeness to death was still too firm a thing in his mind to permit him to realize that he had surmounted a test—that he had been tried by steel and fury, and had stood firm.

"Luke, tie him up and keep him under cover in your shop," Matthew ordered. "Don't let any of his people see him until I talk with Jess Worth."

He turned away, moving unsteadily to the agency house and the room which was his own quarters. His shirt was torn and stained with blood, and he ripped it off to examine his wounds. They were not serious at all, luckily, but they needed attention. A brisk voice said, "Let me help you, Matthew."

It was Maggie Adams, carrying a basin of hot water that smelled of carbolic. She never before had called him by his given name, but now, treating his wounds, she was friendly—almost motherly.

Bandaged, wearing a fresh shirt and fortified with a drink of brandy, Matthew sat down at his desk and wrote a hurried message. He called for young Jim Adams, and said to the boy, "How'd you like to make

a ride to Fort Bennett?" He appealed to youthful imagination. "As a courier?"

Jim's freckled face lighted up. "I'd sure like that."

"Good. Take this message to Major Brandon at the post. If you ride fast, you'll make it by sundown."

The boy took the paper and thrust it into an overall pocket. "You sending for the soldiers, Mr. Kerrigan?" His eyes had grown big.

"That's right, Jim," Matthew said. "And, look—just call me Matt."

"Yes, sir—Matt!"

Bursting with his sudden importance, Jim left the room at a run. Matthew rose and took down a saddle carbine from the gun rack. He was taking no rash chances. If he needed a weapon when talking to Jess Worth, he would be armed. If he could not convince the rancher of his folly he would have cavalry troops to tame down the Sun Ranch crew. Matthew strode determinedly from the building. Until his fight with the Apache buck, he had cared little what had happened to himself, his job, or the agency. But now his mind was made up. He would do a job at Estado. He would show certain people back East that he was not the good for nothing rowdy they had accused him of being.

He spoke to Luke Adams, told him to keep a close watch on his prisoner. He called to Len Cruthers, saying, "You ride with me, Len. You know more about the agency than I do, and you can help me when I talk to Jess Worth."

The sickly storekeeper said, "You don't talk to Jess Worth, Kerrigan; *he* talks to you." But he walked along to the corral and saddled a horse.

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When Matthew Kerrigan sighted the Rancho del Sol outfit, ten miles to the south, it reminded him of a ragtag army on the move. There were twenty-odd riders in the band, armed with enough weapons to stock an arsenal. The outfit traveled with a cook wagon and a bedroll wagon and a long string of mounts. A few of the riders were Mexican vaqueros, but the majority were hardcased Yankee cowhands. Jess Worth rode at the lead on a big dun gelding, a giant of a man with a shaggy white mustache and eyebrows and a mane of snow white hair.

Matthew had learned a little of Jess Worth's history during the ride. Len Cruthers had told him that the rancher had started out as a freighter on the Santa Fe Trail about forty years ago. Then he had turned rancher, first in the Staked Plains and then coming to Arizona Territory in a mass movement of cattle, horses, wagons, and men. He had married a Spanish woman twenty-five years ago, a woman of the Hernandez family which dated back to the conquistadors. Through his marriage, and after his wife's death, Jess Worth had come into the Rancho del Sol—an old Spanish land grant, an empire in itself.

"A tough customer," Len Cruthers said, now as they sighted the Worth outfit. "He had the last Estado agent fired."

It seemed to Matthew that Cruthers both feared and hated Jess Worth.

Big Jess worth reined in, lifted his arm to halt his ragtag army, and it was clear that he liked to make other men come to him. Matthew smiled wryly, rode on across the desert until he was ten feet from Jess Worth. The rancher scowled, said nothing. Matthew dismounted. With the toe of his boot, he drew a line in the dust.

"That far and no farther, Mr. Worth," he said, only now looking at the man.

CHAPTER TWO

Influence and a Sixgun

MATTHEW saw a flicker of surprise in Jess Worth's shaggy browed eyes, then the black look of rage that suffused his heavy face. Jess Worth might rule a cattle empire with an iron hand, but he had no grip on his own temper. It flared up now, and he swore a round oath.

"You damned political boot-polisher! What the hell do you mean?"

He spoke in a bellowing voice, and he wore an arrogant manner like a part of his rough range attire. He was, Matthew realized, a handsome old devil; it was easy to understand how, as a younger man, he had won the heart and hand of a wealthy dark-eyed senorita. But there was no mistaking the hard fact that Jess Worth could be as mean as his bark. Matthew kept a poker face, but he had his moment of uneasiness. Jess Worth could have him shot down. He could have his crew ride right over him. Len Cruthers saw that, and was swinging his mount off to one side.

The twenty-odd men in the Sun Ranch crew waited, lounging in their saddles. The two wagons and the remuda bringing up the rear had halted. Men were grinning, exchanging mocking remarks. Matthew realized how he must appear to this hard-bitten crew: an empty-handed fool, too brash for the pants he wore. But he had stymied Jess Worth for one brief moment, at least. Matthew took his time about answering.

"This looks like an armed invasion," he finally said. "What's behind it, Worth?"

Matthew kept watching the big man but from the corner of his eye he saw one of the Sun riders edge away from the waiting band. Matthew drew his horse closer, so that he could quickly grab for his saddle gun. Jess Worth was talking in a rumbling voice.

"Kerrigan, your damned Estado Apaches have been raiding my range," he was saying. "I warned Renault, the agent before you, that I was sick and tired of it. Three nights ago, a band of them ran off twenty head of horses. That's as much as I'm standing for. I'm a reasonable man, but I can be goaded only so far. . . . Now I aim to teach those Apaches a lesson. There'll be horse thieves dancing at the ends of lass-ropes before I pull out of here!"

"You can identify the thieves?"

"One Apache looks like another to me, Kerrigan."

Matthew shook his head. "That's no good, Worth."

"Why you young squirt, telling me—"

"I'm telling you this," Matthew cut in, "you're not riding further! If you can point out the raiders, come with a law officer and do so."

"The law!" Worth shouted. He slapped the holstered sixgun at his thigh. "I carry the law with me—my brand of law—and no sniveling bureaucrat is going to stop me. He paused for a moment then added, "I can name only one of those raiders—a halfbreed named Sanchez."

Matthew said, "Len, you know a halfbreed named Sanchez?"

Len Cruthers said unsteadily, "Yeah, I know him. There's no Apache blood in him. He's half Navajo. But he hangs around Estado, and he's a bad actor. If there's trouble, Sanchez is most likely behind it."

"That does it," Jess Worth said. "Kerrigan, I'm warning you—*get out of my way!*"

SUDDENLY, it was very still—everything strangely hushed. The group of Sun riders tensed in their saddles without uttering a word. Len Cruthers was pale and rigid. That one rider—off to Matthew's left—had reined in. Matthew was afraid that that rider would set off the powder charge, but he kept his eyes on Jess Worth. The old rancher was lifting the dun's reins. . . . Matthew braced himself, determined not to back down. It was now nothing more than a matter of principle. Worth and his crew could ride around Matthew, but it was clear that this high-riding outfit meant to push him aside. Jess Worth kneeed the dun, rode forward slowly. Matthew reached out for his saddle carbine.

A rider came running at him, the one from his left. He got the carbine clear of its boot, swung around levering a cartridge into the chamber. . . . He swung the carbine up, but a moment too late. The rider was upon him, striking out with a quirt. The quirt slashed down across Matthew's arms, and the stinging pain of the blow ran all the way to his shoulders. He dropped the carbine.

He was about to retrieve it when he heard a woman's voice call out, "Let it be, Matthew Kerrigan—*let it be!*"

Matthew obeyed out of sheer surprise. He straightened, looked at the rider who had jerked her paint horse to a stop before him.

She wore well-tailored range clothes, and a broad-brimmed hat hung at her shoulders by its chin cord. Despite the awkward situation Matthew couldn't help noticing how beautiful she was. She was beautiful in the

vivid way of a Spanish woman; her hair was raven black, her skin was like flawless ivory, and only her eyes showed her Yankee strain.

"You fool," she rasped. "Is it instant death you are seeking?"

Matthew could say nothing at all. He had never known a girl like this, and he was enchanted. He heard Jess Worth mutter, "Carlota, keep out of this," and he suddenly knew who she was. Len Cruthers had told him that Jess Worth had a daughter. This girl was Carlota Worth.

"You Indian agents are all alike," the girl was saying. "You always turn renegade and side those sneaking Apaches against your own people!"

Matthew at last found voice, and he said, "I was thinking of everyone concerned in this, Miss Worth. If your father and his crew ride into the reservation, the Apaches will fight. It's bound to end in bloodshed." He looked squarely at her, hoping she could be reasoned with. "Not a single man in this posse could hope to escape!"

That jarred her. Matthew could see the flash of fear replace the fury in her eyes, and he realized that she had never considered how this thing might really end. She looked from him to her father. One thing was clear, Jess Worth might walk tall among men, but he could not handle his spirited daughter.

"Dad, what he says might be true."

"Politicians and bureaucrats always talk with a slippery tongue," Jess Worth growled. "This Kerrigan is no better than Cal Renault was. Carlota, get back to the ranch and let me handle this."

The girl stood her ground. "No! We'll think this thing out together. I said from the start, Jess, that we should go easy. Why not wait until John Grierson gets here. He's a lawyer, and he'll advise you how far you should go."

"That windy spellbinder!"

"He already warned you there would be trouble with the Government, Jess," she said. She used her father's name with an easy familiarity that showed a strong bond of comradeship between them. "Even if this Indian agent is wrong about the Apaches putting up a fight, it's a sure thing that it'll make trouble for you—in other ways."

The girl talked on and on, and now the Sun riders were fidgeting in their saddles. Jess Worth was thoughtful, rubbing his

square-cut chin with the knuckles of his left fist. The girl had filled him with indecision.

Matthew finally said, "I'm a reasonable man, too, Worth. I'm here to protect the Estado Apaches, but I'm not here to shield outlaws. If you'll hold off, I'll investigate. I'll find this Sanchez, and I'll turn him over to the law."

"An investigation! Such hocus-pocus never gets anywhere!"

"This one will," Matthew said. "I give you my word!"

"Give him his chance," Carlota said. "Let him prove that he's not just another lying Apache-lover. John Grierson will be here by morning—"

Matthew was beginning to feel that he had surmounted a crisis. He waited for Jess Worth's consent, and finally it was grudgingly given. The old rancher muttered, "All right, Kerrigan. You fetch in Sanchez. I'll camp here until I see you fetch him." He struck a great fist against the pommel of his saddle. "But if you don't fetch Sanchez, I'm moving in. I'll put the fear of hell in the black heart of every Apache in Estado!"

He swung his mount about, and called to his crew, "Boys, we camp here." There was a grumbling among the riders; they were men spoiling for a fight, and they did not like this backing down. Matthew saw sulen glances shot his way, and he knew he had made no friends among the Rancho del Sol crew. He picked up his carbine and mounted his horse.

He looked down at Carlota Worth, and said, "Thanks."

"You owe me no thanks, Matt Kerrigan," the girl said. "I'd do as much for any fool rushing in where angels would fear to tread." She considered him with narrowed eyes. "Or are you as much of a fool as you looked a moment ago? I wonder. . . ."

Matthew swung his horse about and rode back toward the agency, almost unaware that Len Cruthers was at his side. He was thinking not of Jess Worth and the Rancho del Sol, nor of the halfbreed Sanchez. He thought of Carlota Worth, perhaps as many another man on occasion thought of her. . . .

IT had been the most hectic day in Matthew Kerrigan's life, and not even that trouble in his past had equalled it. But

though the afternoon was nearly gone by the time he got back to the agency, the day was not yet done. A strange saddle mount stood before the agency, and Len Cruthers said with surprise, "Cal Renault's jughead sorrel."

Matthew had never met the previous agent, but the paunchy and red-faced man who stood talking to Luke Adams answered the description he had been given. As Matthew dismounted, Renault came forward saying, "So you're Kerrigan, my successor?" He offered his hand, and it was moist and too soft for a man's hand. "Hear you're having a little trouble here," he added.

"Nothing that I can't handle, Renault. What can I do for you?"

"Just a small favor, Kerrigan. I found that I mislaid a paper—a personal document." The fat man was bland now, his eyes sly. "Thinking back, I recalled that I left it here at the agency. You'll let me have it, of course, friend Kerrigan?"

Matthew shrugged, and said, "Why not?"

He turned and strode to the agency building, Renault hurrying to keep up with him. "That Jess Worth is a trouble-maker," Renault said. "A bad hombre to cross. I know. He had me fired off this job."

Matthew gave him a surprised look. "He did, eh?"

"Yeah." Renault's voice wasn't jovial now; it was filled with hate. "He pulled some strings. These big ranchers have all kinds of influence, and politicians kow-tow to them. You watch out for Jess Worth, Kerrigan, else you'll be out as Indian agent. Unless—" He looked slyly at Matthew. "Unless you've got some influence of your own."

"I have," Matthew said. "I have an uncle who is a senator."

He heard Renault whistle softly in astonishment, and he permitted the man to think he was boasting. He did not tell Cal Renault that it had been his senator-uncle who had suggested sending him to the Estado Agency—to get him far away from that trouble at home.

Inside, Matthew went to the old oak table that served as a desk. It had three sizable drawers, and there had been some papers in one of them when Matthew took over the place. He pulled the drawer out, reached

far back, brought out the papers which now were neatly tied together. Renault was breathing a little fast as he reached for the packet.

Matthew retained his grip on the papers. "Describe this paper, Renault, and I'll pick it out for you. I wouldn't want to give you the wrong one—after the long ride you've made."

Renault stood there with his reaching hand in mid-air. The eagerness faded from his expression; the metallic eyes glittered. He said slowly, "It's an old paper, Kerrigan. It's folded over, and its edges are a little ragged. It's sort of soiled. . . . You'll know it, because it was torn out of some sort of a book."

Matthew broke the string holding the packet, began sorting through the papers. Mostly, they were agency accounts and report copies. But one was as Renault said; it was so old it was soiled and ragged at the edges, and it had been torn from a book. Renault was reaching again.

"That's it, Kerrigan—*that's it!*"

Matthew moved back a step, unfolding the paper. He glanced at the few penned lines of handwriting; the script was crude, the ink faded, but the words were still legible. Matthew looked up and he saw beads of sweat on the face of Cal Renault. He said, "Renault, you are mistaken. This paper does not belong to you!"

CHAPTER THREE

Trouble Casts its Shadow

CAL RENAULT'S chest heaved and fell with his hurried breathing. He took a red bandana from his coat pocket and mopped at his face. He said, whining like a beggar, "Kerrigan, I've got to have it. It's no good to you. If you hand it over, I—I'll make it worth your while."

"A bribe, Renault?" Matthew shook his head. "What good is it to you, anyway. It's merely a minister's record of Jess Worth's marriage? What's your game?"

Renault, still mopping his sweated face, did not answer.

Matthew read the document a second time, suddenly realizing that it did not tell of Jess Worth's marriage to a Spanish senorita named Hernandez—but to an Indian woman. He read:

"To whom it may concern: As a Minister of the Gospel, I do hereby attest that Jess Worth and a Navajo woman called Maria have this date, the 2nd of May in the Year of Our Lord, 1848, been joined in Holy Matrimony in the village of Santa Fe. Signed: Reverend Jonathan Hanly."

Matthew looked up from the worn paper. He saw the look of guilt on Renault's face, and he guessed that this paper could somehow be used in a swindle. A man like Jess Worth might not want it known that thirty years ago he had married an Indian woman—that he had been a squaw man who'd left his wife.

Matthew repeated, "What do you want this paper for?"

"Jess Worth will pay me for it, Kerrigan."

"How do you know? You're not on speaking terms with Worth."

"John Grierson, the lawyer in Lanassa, told me," said Renault. "I was talking to Grierson a couple of days ago, and I happened to mention that I knew Jess Worth had been married to an Indian squaw years back. Grierson didn't believe me, so I told him about this paper. I don't know how it happened to be here at the Agency, but maybe that preacher was here long ago—or maybe that Navajo woman was here. Anyway, John Grierson said he'd pay me five hundred dollars for the paper. I need the money, Kerrigan—need it bad!"

Matthew was still suspicious. It seemed to him that Renault was telling him but a part of the truth. He said, "I'm keeping the paper, Renault. When I see Jess Worth again, I'll turn it over to him. If he figures it's worth five hundred dollars, I'll see that he pays it to you."

"Worth won't pay me a penny," Renault whined. "He hates my guts. You give it to Grierson, Kerrigan. He'll see that I get a square deal."

Matthew shook his head. "I'll give it to Jess Worth."

Renault stared at him with a bright hatred in his eyes. But he shrugged, and said, "You're a hard man, Kerrigan," and he turned as if to leave. He was close to the doorway when he suddenly turned. He had a gun in his hand. "I want that paper, Kerrigan!"

But Matthew had suspected such a play, and he was already lunging at the fat man.

He slapped down Renault's gun arm, drove his right fist into the man's paunch. Renault groaned and slammed back against the wall. Matthew shoved his bent knee against his middle, holding him there while wrenching the sixgun from his hand. He broke open the heavy .45 and emptied the cylinder of cartridges. He tossed the empty weapon to Renault, and said, "Clear out, tinhorn, and don't come back!"

"Kerrigan, this is a bigger thing than you know—"

"Clear out, Renault!"

Renault went then, shrinking from Matthew's fists. He went to his sorrel horse, pulled his bulk to the saddle, and rode away at a hard lope. He headed east toward Lanassa, eighteen miles away.

MATTHEW puzzled a moment longer over the document, which he recovered from the floor where it had dropped when he jumped Renault. He was certain that Renault and the lawyer John Grierson were planning some sort of a swindle. He looked about for a safe place to keep the paper, and his glance fell upon a quiver of arrows that hung on the wall. He had traded a cheap watch for the arrows when he first came to Estado. He had half-planned to take it back East with him, as a souvenir, when he returned home—if ever he went back home. Now he stopped over, removed the arrows from the buckskin quiver.

He placed the document in the quiver, then walked to the table and took a letter from one of the drawers. It too was best hidden; it was from his brother back in Philadelphia, it mentioned that trouble back East. Matthew placed the letter in the quiver with the other paper, then thrust the arrows back in place. He was just turning away from the wall when Len Cruthers appeared in the doorway.

Matthew frowned, wondering how much the sickly storekeeper had seen. But Cruthers merely said, "Luke Adams wants to know what he should do with that Apache he's got tied up."

Matthew considered, remembering that he had promised Jess Worth that he would find the halfbreed Sanchez and turn him over to the law. "Tell Luke to bring the Apache here, Len."

The blackbearded Luke Adams came showing the Apache into the room five min-

utes later. The Indian's hands were tied behind him, and Matthew said, "Cut him loose, Luke, and give him back his knife."

Luke Adams obeyed reluctantly. Pina stood staring at the knife now returned to his hand as though not understanding. He looked up at Matthew finally, a question in his black eyes.

"Tel him, Luke, that he's a good warrior," Matthew said. "Tell him that I hold no grudge against him."

Luke Adams translated, then Pina spoke.

"He says the Indian agent too is a good warrior," Luke told Matthew. "He wants to know if he can go free?"

Matthew nodded. "He's free to go. But I want him to take me to the halfbreed called Sanchez."

"He'll take you to him at sun-up, Matt," Luke Adams said. He then added, "That breed is a bad hombre, a damn' outlaw."

Matthew ignored that, and looked at Pina. He gestured as the Indian had done, sweeping his arm up in a wide arc to represent the rising of the sun. "Sun-up," he said.

MATTHEW was awakened in the night by a sound. It was the choking sound of a man trying to smother a coughing spell. Matthew rose in his bed, listening. He was the only person who slept in the agency building proper. The Adams family had a small adobe house of their own, and Len Cruthers slept in a back room of the agency store building. Miss Agatha lived with the Adams family.

Again came that half stifled cough.

Matthew knew then that it was Len Cruthers. Throwing aside his blanket, Matthew left his bed as quietly as possible. He moved barefooted through the darkness. There was no door hung between his quarters and the office, so he could move unhindered through the doorway. He saw a vague shape, and he said, "Len, that you?"

He heard a gasp of surprise. The shape moved fast, collided with a chair and upset it. Len Cruthers' voice cried out in alarm. Matthew ran at him, then the blast and flash of a gunshot burst upon him. He was not hit, but he reeled back in startled shock. Len Cruthers turned and ran from the building. Matthew still stood rooted. Outside, a horse was lifted into a pounding run.

Matthew felt his way to the desk. He

found a match and struck it. On the floor he saw the Apache quiver that had hung on the wall, the arrows from it strewn about.

Luke Adams came running, clad only in his underwear drawers and his boots. He was breathing hard through his beard, and he gasped, "Matt, what happened?"

"Len Cruthers was here looking for a document that I'd hidden in this Apache quiver."

Matthew stooped and picked up the buckskin quiver. He ran his hand inside and his searching fingers found a paper. He brought the paper out, and it was the record of Jess Worth's marriage to the Indian woman. But the other paper—that letter from his brother was gone. Len Cruthers had not guessed there were two papers hidden in that quiver. Matthew looked at Luke Adams.

"Luke, did Cal Renault come back here after he'd talked with me?"

Luke Adams was puzzled by all this, but he nodded and said, "He came back after dark and talked with Len. You think Renault got Len to steal that document?"

"I know it," Matthew said. "But he got the wrong one. He wanted this one, to use against Jess Worth. He got one that concerns only me."

MATTHEW had his flapjacks, bacon and coffee in Maggie Adams' kitchen that morning without knowing just what it was he was eating. The day before had been bad enough for him; this new one promised to be worse. The Apache called Pina had kept his promise to take him to Sanchez; at least, the Indian had been squatting against the agency wall since sun-up. But Matthew was concerned with the letter Len Cruthers had stolen.

Matthew could remember a part of what Steve, his brother, had written. ". . . the family is trying to pay back the shortage at the bank, Matt. It's mighty hard going, getting our hands on twenty thousand dollars, but you can depend on us. We'll not let you go to prison. So far Mr. Lawton, the bank president, is being pretty decent about the theft. But it looks as though he's only keeping me in my job to be sure the money is paid back. . . ."

That letter was like a charge of gunpowder. If Len Cruthers and Cal Renault made use of it, the entire Kerrigan family might

well be involved in a scandal. It could have Matthew kicked out of his job, should it reach the Indian Bureau in Washington. Should it be made public, Matthew's father, a businessman in Philadelphia, would be disgraced. And Matthew's uncle, the senator, would have his reputation ruined for having had a hand in getting a nephew accused of bank theft a Government job. Matthew realized that he had not escaped trouble by coming West. It seemed that he was born to trouble. It followed him wherever he went. Luke Adams came into the kitchen.

"Your horse is saddled, Matt," the blacksmith said. "That Apache buck is waiting." He shook his head in disapproval. "I hate to see you ride out. It's a plumb foolish thing, riding into the hills after that Sanchez. Why don't you wait until my Jim fetches the Army?"

Matthew rose from the table without answering. He had sent for troops to keep the Rancho del Sol crew from starting an Indian war, not to come into the reservation to hunt outlaws. Matthew didn't want bloodshed. He took up his hat and walked out into the sun.

The Apache stood up and moved to his pony.

Matthew mounted his horse, a big black with four white stockings.

"Sanchez," Matthew said.

"Sanchez," said the Apache, and led the way north.

CHAPTER FOUR

For Death Only!

THE land of the Estado Apache was rock and dust and cactus. The trail led north. It stretched through the barren cliffs of the Swaybacks. The blazing sun arced up in a pale sky, and heat haze shimmered on every desert distance. Matthew Kerrigan and his silent Apache guide rode past emptied villages, and Matthew knew that the Indians—men, women and children—had taken to the hills, as they always did when war threatened.

But he knew too that naked warriors would be ready to sally forth from the hills, mounted and armed and eager to fight. A strange thing; he, Matthew Kerrigan, had been three months ago a mere bank clerk in a civilized city, and now he was riding

to stop a tribe of savages from bloody warfare.

The hours passed, and at high-noon, with the brassy sun overhead, Pina and Matthew stood by a water-hole. They drank, they watered their horses, they rested for a time. Far across the desert, to the west, a band of Indians raised a dust cloud as they trailed south. Matthew pointed toward the band and tried to ask Pina where it was headed.

The Apache, not understanding, pointed north toward the rock hills, and said, "Sanchez."

They mounted and rode on, and in mid-afternoon they entered a rock-strewn canyon in the Swaybacks. There was a tiny stream gurgling through the rocky canyon floor, and by it Pina reined it. "Sanchez," he said, dismounting. He drank, then removed the rope halter from his paint. It was the end of the trail, Matthew realized, but there were no signs of any other humans in the canyon. Sanchez was not there.

It was a long wait. The hours dragged, and the sun was sinking. The horses grazed on bunch grass, but Matthew had to let his empty stomach grumble complainingly. He drank his fill of water, and he smoked his pipe. Pina sat cross-legged in the shade of a boulder, and slept. At dusk, the Apache roused Matthew from the light doze into which he had fallen. Again Pina said, "Sanchez."

They took to their mounts and rode toward a campfire that now glowed brightly at the far end of the canyon. As they drew near, Matthew thought it was a white man hunkered down by the fire. But when they halted, and the man looked up, Matthew realized that at last he was face to face with the notorious Sanchez.

Sanchez spoke to Pina in guttural Apache, and the Indian wheeled his paint about and rode off into the night. Matthew stared at Sanchez, feeling his heart pounding. He had expected some miserable half-breed. But Sanchez, in his own way, was as formidable as old Jess Worth. He met Matthew's stare with a deliberate steadiness. Sanchez's eyes were light blue. The firelight flickered on his copper-brown face; it was an Indian face, and yet, somehow, it was a white man's face. Sanchez gestured toward his campfire.

"Grub?"

"Thanks," said Matthew.

Sanchez cooked and ate his food like a white man; he had beef and beans and coffee. He was like any other man across a campfire, waiting until the grub was stewed away before talking.

"Kerrigan, you came a long way," Sanchez finally said. "What do you want?"

Matthew said, "I guess you know why I've come, Sanchez. You've been stirring up trouble. You've been leading some of the Apaches on raids against the Rancho del Sol. Sanchez, I've come to take you—"

"Take me—how, Kerrigan? You ride up with your saddle gun in its boot. You wear no pistol. The Apaches say you are a fool. Now I know it's true. You know why I let you find me, Kerrigan?"

Matthew could not answer that.

Sanchez said simply, "I planned to kill you, white man!"

THE fire between them was dying, but it still cast a ruddy glow on the face of Sanchez. It was a hate-filled face, revealing in ugly nakedness the nature of the man. And Matthew Kerrigan suddenly understood many things about Sanchez. The outlaw was a pariah, and always had been; he was neither white man nor Indian, and because of that he was bitter, and out of bitterness he hated. It was true what Matthew had been told; that Sanchez hated all white men.

Sanchez had eaten with a long bladed clasp knife which was more of a weapon than an implement for eating. Now he snapped the blade closed into its handle, with a grim finality.

"But a man can't kill a fool, Kerrigan," he said. "You saved your own life by being a fool. If you'd come after me with a gun in your hand. . . ." He shook his head. "A fool, a greenhorn. You don't belong in this country, Kerrigan. It's too wild for a civilized man."

"You're civilized yourself, Sanchez," Matthew said. "You talk like a man who has had some schooling."

"A white man took me as a kid, when my mother died," said Sanchez. "He gave me no schooling, except what's in a whip. I slept in his barn, and my food was handed to me outside his kitchen door. I was a kid, and he worked me like a man. All I learned from him was to talk like a white man."

"And to think like one, Sanchez."

"You think that?" said Sanchez, staring at Matthew.

Matthew nodded. "I think that," he said. But his thoughts were confused. He had promised to take this man a prisoner, to hand him over to the law; he had made that rash promise to Jess Worth because, as Sanchez said, he was a fool.

"Only a man who thinks like a white man can hate as you do, Sanchez. To hate, to hold a grudge, is a thing in a white man's nature."

"You know why I hate, Kerrigan?" Sanchez asked. "I was whelped by a white man—a no-good who deserted the squaw who was my mother. He brought me into this world as neither white man or Indian. That squaw had a feeling for him, even when she died—but me, I hated him, even though I never saw him. If I could find him. . . ."

"You'd kill him?"

"I'd kill him," said Sanchez. "Because sometimes I think like an Indian."

Matthew was gripped by a startling thought. He was remembering that paper Len Cruthers had tried to steal for Cal Renault; the record of Jess Worth's marriage to an Indian woman thirty years ago. Sanchez might be thirty. . . . He might be the issue of that long forgotten marriage!

Sanchez suddenly rose. He walked around the fire and took the carbine from the saddle of Matthew's horse. He emptied the weapon of cartridges, saying, "Our trails met, and part here, Kerrigan." His back was still toward Matthew. He had called Matthew a fool, and so he should have expected him to act like one. Only a foolish man would have risked attacking an armed man, with empty hands. But Matthew knew, as he lunged forward, that this was his only chance of taking Sanchez.

His shoulder slammed against the back of the outlaw's knees. His arms at the same instant wrapped about the man's legs. He lifted Sanchez bodily, then flung him down. He struck Sanchez a terrific blow at the base of the skull, and Sanchez sank to the ground in a limp heap. Sanchez tried to draw his sixgun with a fumbling hand, but it was Matthew who pulled it from the holster. Sanchez's sombrero had fallen, and Matthew struck the gun barrel down across the uncovered head. It was a savage blow, and Sanchez stretched out unconscious.

Matthew thrust the sixgun into the waistband of his breeches. He was half sickened by the brutality he had been forced to. He had had no grudge against Sanchez. He had almost liked the man. . . . Matthew could only justify his brutality by telling himself that it would save the Estado from bloodshed.

He wondered how he was to get Sanchez out of the hills. He found the outlaw's horse ground-hitched out in the darkness. A lariat hung was the mount's saddle. It would do to truss up the prisoner.

IT WAS a wild, hard ride for Matthew. It was another nightmare. He had Sanchez, who was conscious now, tied to his mount. He rode leading the outlaw's mount. Neither of them spoke. Sanchez was stonily silent, like a sullen man awaiting his moment to pay off a grudge. Matthew had his moments of fear. . . . Once, on reining in to blow the horses, he heard a band of Apaches riding nearby in the darkness. He gagged Sanchez then, with the outlaw's own neckerchief. Another time, two Apaches gave chase and Matthew had to fire a shot from the sixgun to fend them off.

Matthew pushed the horses on the way south, and it was about midnight when he sighted a light that marked the agency.

"Sanchez," he said, "I will see that you are given an honest trial."

Sanchez laughed hollowly. "An honest trial! Jess Worth will hang me. But I am not dangling from a rope, yet—not yet, Kerrigan!"

Matthew stared at him. The outlaw seemed neither worried or afraid.

Nearing the agency, Matthew saw an encampment by Rondo Creek. It was the Rancho del Sol outfit—wagons, horses and men. Now it was Matthew's time to mutter an angry oath. He had told Jess Worth to stay and make his camp eight miles to the south, beyond that line he had drawn in the dust. Still leading Sanchez's mount, he headed for the camp. Matthew roused the sleeping crew with a shout: "You, Worth—wake up!"

Drowsy men crawled from their blankets. Jess Worth's bold voice came through the darkness, asking, "That you, Kerrigan? Sanchez with you?"

The old rancher came forward pulling his galluses up over his shoulders. Without his

hat, he looked shaggier than ever. The others crowded forward, some of them muttering their surprise; it was clear that the tough Sun Ranch crew had not believed Matthew would be able to take Sanchez. Carlota Worth appeared, her dark hair tousled, a Mexican serape wrapped about her shoulders. There was a new face among the crew, the pale face of a townsman; it belonged to a man who pulled on a white silk shirt. Somebody threw some brush onto the embers of a campfire, and a sudden blaze lighted up the scene.

"Worth, I kept my part of the deal," Matthew said angrily. "I brought in Sanchez. You fell down on your part. You came across that line I drew."

"Take it easy, friend," Worth said. "I came to the agency under orders. You sent for the Army. Well, it came. A detail of troopers is camped yonder—" He waved toward the darkness of the creek. "The lieutenant in command said we'd all come here and camp until you showed up." He looked from Matthew to the sullen Sanchez. "So you're the hombre who's been raiding my range and running off my stock? Well, my friend, I hope to see you hang!"

"He gets a court trial," Matthew said sharply. "That's my promise to him."

"Fair enough," Worth growled. "We'll start for Lanassa at sun-up."

"At sun-up," said Sanchez, his voice ringing with his hate, "you and all your people will die here, Worth. The Apaches were watching you. They know you've come into their reservation, and at dawn they will attack this place." He laughed in that hollow, mirthless way of his. "They have been gathering in the hills since early this morning. If I'm to hang, white man, you'll have to hang me tonight!"

Jess Worth's face went suddenly slack. His daughter moved close to him. The man who seemed to be a townsman stepped forward, saying, "Worth, I believe this outlaw speaks the truth. I suggest that we move out of here, now—at once."

"Leave if you like, Grierson," Worth said, "but I'll not turn tail for a bunch of Apaches!"

"I advise you, Mr. Worth!"

"I'm not asking for a lawyer's advice, Grierson!"

Matthew stared at the lawyer. John Grierson. . . . The man who would have

paid Cal Renault five hundred dollars for the record of Jess Worth's marriage to an Indian woman. Grierson returned Matthew's stare, and his lips formed a smile that was somehow mocking.

"Mr. Kerrigan," he said, "I've been wanting to meet you."

"Cal Renault told me as much."

Grierson's smile broadened. He said, "Our talk will have to wait. I am leaving here, being a cautious man."

Matthew saw a buggy standing near the ranch wagons, and judged it was Grierson's mode of travel. But now, before Grierson could turn away, a rifle shot rang out. The sound came from the cavalry camp. Men looked at one another. Carlota Worth's eyes were full of alarm. Sanchez laughed mockingly. Another shot rang out, and men shouted. It was now too late for anyone to leave. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

Something to Live For

MATTHEW silently cursed the foolhardiness of men. Because of a few stolen horses, guns would blaze and men would die. It was a senseless thing. . . . The gunfire and the shouting out in the darkness of Rondo Creek had abruptly died away, and whatever had happened—perhaps some over-eager Apache bucks sniping at the cavalry camp—was over for the moment. But here at the Rancho del Sol camp, Jess Worth barked orders and his hardcase crew went running for their arms.

Jess Worth, and Sanchez. . . . Two men far too ready to shed blood.

But Matthew shouldered some of the blame, himself. As Indian Agent, he was supposed to stop such a thing as this from occurring. And he had failed. With trouble striking the Estado Agency, he was unable to handle it.

For an instant, Matthew was gripped by a sense of unreality. He remembered stage plays he had seen in theaters back East; there had been drama enacted before his very eyes, yet he had had no part in it. This grim business was much the same as a stage play, for it had gotten out of hand for him. Matthew felt helpless, inadequate.

"You hold a hand in a death game, Kerrigan," Sanchez said.

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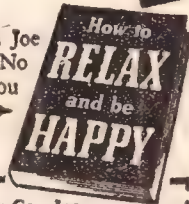
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Matthew turned in the saddle and stared at the halfbreed's mocking face. He said, "Sanchez, could you stop this thing?"

"Would I, if I could?"

"I appeal to you, Sanchez—to save lives."

"White men's lives, Kerrigan? Apache lives?" He shook his head. "I am neither white man or Apache. This does not have meaning for me."

Matthew knew then that it was useless, hopeless. There was no power on earth to stop this nightmarish thing. He swung his horse about, led Sanchez's mount to the Agency. Once inside the gateway, he saw Luke Adams coming through the darkness with a rifle in his hand.

"I guess this means war, Matt!" the blacksmith said.

"The Apaches will attack at dawn," Matthew replied. He handed the reins of the outlaw's mount to Luke Adams. "Lock Sanchez up, as you did the Apache, Luke. I'm riding to the cavalry camp."

He swung away, lifting his black to a lope, but in less than half a mile he came up to a column of blue-clad mounted men. There were twenty troopers under a young lieutenant named Howard, a man Matthew had met on other occasions. An officer and twenty men . . . a poor showing against three hundred Apaches. "This looks like a real outbreak, Kerrigan," the lieutenant said. "The Apaches are everywhere."

"They mean to attack at dawn," Matthew said. "I suggest that we barricade ourselves in the agency, along with the Rancho del Sol crew. We may be able to hold them off. Is there any way you can send for help?"

"I sent ou a courier, hoping he'd get through to Fort Bennett."

"He got through?"

"You heard shots, a few minutes ago?"

Matthew nodded, knowing the courier did not get through.

The night seemed full of lurking shapes, and yet a man could peer into the curtain of darkness and see no signs of Apache riders. Yet they were there, hidden by the night, awaiting the dawn.

LIEUTENANT Howard took over the defense of the agency. He bluntly told Jess Worth that the Rancho del Sol crew

BORN TO GUNSMOKE!

must fight under his orders. He posted men about the adobe wall and atop the agency buildings. The gates were long ago gone from the entrance in the wall, so grim-faced troopers built a barricade of rocks and timbers and the Rancho del Sol wagons. Somehow, the mission must withstand a siege.

Matthew walked toward the blacksmith shop, and met Luke Adams coming from the building. Luke Adams said, "He'll keep, Matt. I chained that Sanchez to a post. You want to talk to him?"

"No use, Luke. He wants to see this game played out."

"He swears he'll never hang. He must figure the Apaches will overrun this place and release him." Luke Adams' voice hardened. "Me, I'll kill him before they get to him. How about some coffee, friend?"

Matthew nodded. He was done in; he was tired and hungry, and he had lost all hope. He never had fought Apaches, but he knew that the handful of men within the agency would have little chance against an attacking horde.

They halted outside Maggie Adams' kitchen door, facing one another; suddenly, they were two men who had become friends. "I want to say, Matt, that I've seen Indian agents come and go. . . . But you are the best of the crop."

A small thing, perhaps. But the sense of utter failure lifted from Matthew Kerrigan. He reached out his hand, and it was gripped by Luke Adams' great calloused hand.

Matthew drank some coffee and ate some food and then returned to the agency office. He took a match from his pocket and struck it alight. He reached up and lighted the ceiling oil lamp, and only then did he become aware that someone else was in the big room. A man sat lounging in a chair tilted back against the wall. It was the fat Cal Renault, and he had the look of a man who has patiently waited a very long time.

"How'd you get in here?" Matthew demanded.

"Been here since sundown, Kerrigan," Renault said, smiling blandly. "Left my horse out on the desert, came in afoot so Luke Adams wouldn't see me and maybe run me off. Wanted to talk to you, friend."

He let the chair down and lifted his bulky person. He stood and faced Matthew from half across the room. "Apache trouble, eh,

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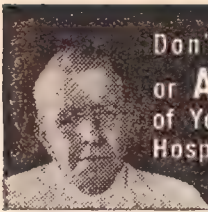
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Kerrigan?" he said. "Never had any like this when I was Indian agent."

"What do you want, Renault?"

"I came to make a trade, Kerrigan. A certain letter came into my hands. . . . A letter signed by a Steve Kerrigan, who's maybe your brother."

"Blackmail is a dirty business, Renault."

"Not so dirty as stealing money from a bank a man works for, Kerrigan. Twenty thousand dollars, was it? Well, you're no piker."

"Get on with it. What kind of a trade do you want?"

"I'll give you that letter for that document I came for the other day," Renault replied. "The one Len Cruthers was fool enough to let slip through his fingers. Funny thing; Len stole the wrong paper, yet it works out all right, after all. You want that letter, Kerrigan?"

"Suppose I don't?"

"Suppose I send it through the mail to the Indian Bureau in Washington?" Renault parried. "There'd be an investigation, and you'd lose this post. Maybe the Indian Bureau would even put the law onto you."

Matthew took a threatening step toward him. "Get the hell out of here," he said. "I won't make any trade with a blackmailer."

"We'll see," Renault muttered, and walked from the room.

Alone, Matthew stood wrapped in uncertain thought. He had talked big to Cal Renault, but the tinhorn's threat lingered in his mind. And Matthew knew that he dared not let Renault put that letter into the mails. He had more than himself to protect. The future of his entire family was at stake. A voice from the doorway said, "So you're not the fine upstanding young man you seem, Matthew Kerrigan?"

Startled, Matthew looked up and saw Carlota Worth standing there.

"You heard?"

The girl nodded. She came toward him, a tall lithe girl in mannish range clothes. She seemed not at all shocked by what she had overheard. Carlota Worth was smiling. She halted before him, within arm reach. "I trust you Matt. I know there must be some explanation for all this."

Matt heard a gunshot, far off yet so very near, and he was filled with dismay. He wanted to live.

BORN TO GUNSMOKE!

Matthew suddenly slipped his arms about Carlota Worth and kissed her firmly.

CHAPTER SIX

Peace at Death Mission

THERE was a burst of gunfire, loud against the night's stillness. Racing hoofs pounded, and Apaches yells rang out. Within the ancient mission, men sprang to their places with weapons in hand. Army carbines and cowboy sixguns opened up a racketing fire. The Apache attack was against the south wall, centering upon the barricaded gateway. Matthew put Carlota Worth from him, their kiss forgotten. "Stay here," he said, and, grabbing a rifle from the gun-rack and ran outside.

Lieutenant Howard's troopers were manning the gate barricade. The officer was firing his big Navy Colt, and his dismounted troopers kept up a steady blaze of fire. All hell had broken loose.

Matthew turned and ran past the agency's main building. He was nearing the little schoolhouse when a gun within the mission spurted flame at him. Matthew felt the im-

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part of some heavy blow. It spun him half around, then dropped him to his knees.

The hidden gun spurted lurid red flame again, and this time Matthew heard the vicious whine of the bullet. An Apache inside the mission? No, it could not be! But Matthew knew that someone there was trying to kill him. He dropped flat, placed the rifle to his shoulder. He leveled a cartridge into the chamber, and peered into the darkness beside the schoolhouse wall. The racket of gunfire still rose from about the mission gateway. . . . The Apaches still yelled their unholy war cries. The din rose in wild crescendo. Matthew's heart was pounding. He was drenched with sweat. He had great pain; each breath he drew shot stabs of pain through his right side.

The hidden gun blazed again.

A sixgun. . . . Matthew aimed at the spot where the gunflame had spurted. He squeezed the rifle's trigger. His shot was echoed by a man's high scream. Matthew lay gasping. He heard Carlota cry, "Matthew—Matthew!"

The gunfire and the Apache yells died away. The raid had been beaten off.

CARLOTA helped him to his feet. Jess Worth and two of his hands came running up. "What happened?" the oldster asked.

"Somebody over by the schoolhouse shot me," Matthew said. "I think I got him. It must be Cal Renault."

The two cowhands went to investigate, and one called shortly, "It's Cal Renault, all right. He's unconscious."

"Bring him into the agency office," Matthew said.

With Carlota and old Jess Worth helping him, Matthew walked to the building. He went to the back room and stretched out on his bed. His breathing was still painful, and his mind was still dazed.

It was a clean enough wound, and not too severe. The slug had not harbored in his body, but it's passage had broken three of his ribs.

Carlota had located his bottle of brandy, and she gave him a drink that quickly cleared the haze from his mind. Jess Worth came into the room, and Matthew asked, "Did you bring Renault in?"

"He's dying, Kerrigan."

BORN TO GUNSMOKE!

Matthew said, "I've got to talk to him." He sat up, with Carlota's help but against her protests. He felt giddy when standing, but after a moment dizziness passed. He walked to the main room, and Cal Renault was lying upon a blanket. "Carlota, fetch the brandy," Matthew said.

The two cowhands were there, eying Renault frowningly. Matthew looked at Jess Worth, and said, "We'll be alone with him, Jess. Get rid of the others."

He sent the cowboys away. When Carlota came with the brandy, he took it and told her to wait outside. Maggie Adams already had gone. Jess Worth appeared puzzled as he watched Matthew pick up the coat he had been wearing when shot. Matthew took his wallet from the inside pocket of the coat, and from the wallet took that old paper upon which was recorded the marriage of Jess Worth to the Navajo woman called Maria. He handed the document to Jess Worth, saying, "This is what Renault was after. He tried to kill me, so that I couldn't give it to you."

Jess Worth moved close to the oil lamp,

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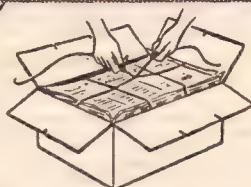
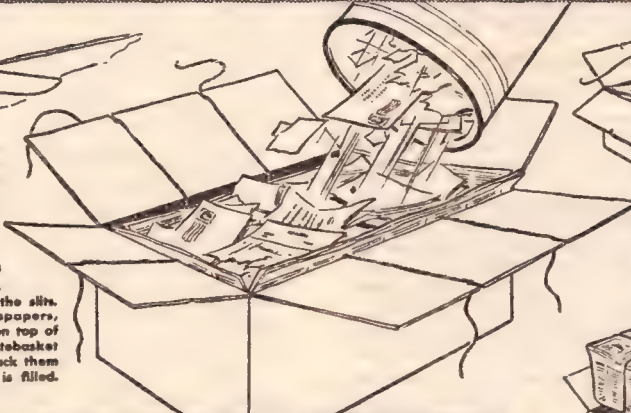
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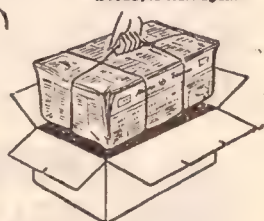


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and as he stared at the old paper his face went slack. His big hands began to shake violently. His lips moved, and it seemed to Matthew that Jess Worth muttered, "Maria—Maria!"

Matthew turned from the old man. He took the brandy bottle from the table where Jess Worth had placed it. He had difficulty kneeling, because of his wound, but he made it. He forced some of the liquor down Renault's throat.

"You're dying, Renault," Matthew said, not unkindly. "It would be a good thing for you to ease your conscience. Jess Worth is here, Renault. Tell him why you wanted that record of his marriage."

Renault said, gaspingly, "Grierson—"

"Grierson wanted it? Why?"

"He was going to—to find a half-breed," Renault said falteringly. Matthew quickly gave him more of the brandy; it acted as a quick stimulant, and Renault's voice seemed stronger. "A half-breed, maybe that Sanchez. Grierson planned to pass him off as Jess Worth's son, by the Indian squaw."

Renault sighed like a man very tired. Then: "Jess Worth is old, and he won't live forever. Or maybe Grierson planned to kill him, somehow. Grierson wanted the Rancho del Sol. He could claim the halfbreed was Jess Worth's real heir. In the end, Grierson figured, he'd get the Rancho del Sol for himself. Get rid of Carlota, and the halfbreed too. . . . Me, I was to cash in—"

A spasm gripped Cal Renault. And then, with another sigh, he was dead.

Matthew covered the body of Renault with a blanket, then turned to Jess Worth. The rancher looked older, and somehow smaller, and his voice had lost its bluster as it said, "Kerrigan, I left my Indian wife in Santa Fe, thirty years ago—in a house I'd had built for her. I was heading for Missouri with my freight wagons. I couldn't take her with me, because she had just given birth to a child. . . . When I came back, six months later, she and the child were gone. I hunted for her, for more than a year . . . and never found her. Eight years later, I married again—"

Matthew was thinking of Sanchez. He said, "Jess, is it possible that Sanchez might be that lost child?"

BORN TO GUNSMOKE!

Worth's eyes widened with startled surprise. But then he shook his head. "No, he can't be," he muttered. "I believe Maria took the child and went back to her tribe. . . . Those Navajos denied it, when I asked them, but I always believed—" He broke off, gripped by a thought. "Kerrigan, my son had a birth mark on his left shoulder!"

Matthew said, "We'll see Sanchez."

DAWN was not far off as Matthew painfully walked to the blacksmith shop with Jess Worth. Luke Adams took them inside and lighted a lantern. Matthew said, "Let him loose, Luke," and the blacksmith took a cold chisel and a hammer and cut Sanchez loose from the chains that held his arms tight to the post.

"Peel off your shirt," Matthew ordered.

Sanchez stared at him for a moment, then frowningly obeyed.

There was a large, crescent-shaped and red-brown birth mark on the left shoulder. Matthew looked at Jess Worth, and the old man nodded.

Sanchez pulled on his shirt, and said again, "What is this?"

The explanation was up to Matthew, and he did it well. He spoke quickly, for shortly the eastern sky would turn gray—and with the first faint light of dawn the Apaches would attack. He told Sanchez that the two of them, Jess Worth and Sanchez, were father and son—that they were of the same flesh and blood. Watching the outlaw's impassive face, Matthew pleaded desperately. He told how Jess Worth had in desperation hunted for his wife and baby.

"You and your mother were not abandoned, Sanchez," he ended up.

Sanchez said flatly, "Kerrigan, you believe what you say. Maybe because you are a fool, maybe because you are a wise man. What do you want of me?"

"There are women in this place," Matthew said. "One has a son, who is a still a child in her eyes. There are men here who breathe the same air as you, and walk the same earth. There are Apaches beyond these walls who have been misled."

Jess Worth said, "Son, what is happening here is much my fault. But I cannot stop it. I am asking you—"

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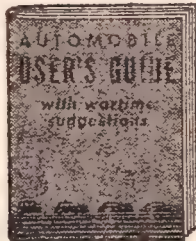
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Sanchez said flatly, "I will go."

He was given a horse. The barricade at the gateway was torn down so that he might ride out. There was a faint thinning of darkness in the eastern sky as he rode out into the desert. The barricade was thrown up again, and men all around the mission wall stood ready with their weapons. There was silence on the desert, a silence more ominous it seemed to Matthew Kerrigan than the racket of guns and the yells of warring Apaches. It was a quiet that lasted, and stretched into an eternity of waiting. The dawn burst in a fan of gold tinted colors. Finally the sun lifted, a great red ball . . . and the desert was empty of Apaches.

Matthew let a month go by before he journeyed to the Rancho del Sol. It was a forty-mile ride, and he arrived before the big Spanish hacienda of a sundown. A Mexican vaquera took his horse and directed him through a walled patio to a veranda of the great adobe house. A soft musical voice said, "Matthew," and Carlota came toward him through the fading light.

"You are beautiful, Carlota," Matthew said. "But there is something else I must say before I tell you that. I never stole money from a bank, Carlota. It was my brother, who worked in the same bank. . . . Steve had a weakness—gambling. He had a wife and a child. What could I do but take the blame? No one but Steve and I know the truth. My uncle, who is a senator, did not even know what sort of trouble it was he was getting me out of when he got me sent to Estado." He paused and looked worriedly at this wonderful girl. "Do you believe what I say, Carlota?"

She came into his arms, but then they drew a little apart. Two riders had come clattering up to the ranchhouse, and now they came walking into the patio. The bulkier of the two said lustily, "It's Matt Kerrigan! Well, son, it's about time you came to claim your bride-to-be!"

The other man seemed even more pleased. He came striding forward with his hand outstretched. "Welcome, Matt. Welcome into the family," said Sanchez. His dark face was smiling.

THE END

RED TRAIL ALONG THE POWDER

(Continued from page 70)

breech-loading Remingtons. In slow, measured words, Story uttered one of the most famous pledges in Western history.

"Men," he said simply, "I'm taking you out, and I promise I'll bring you back!"

"Reckon I'll stay on," Dow mumbled unhappily, and scooped himself another plate of gravy.

They decided to trail at night. In the daytime, the cattle were herded under guard.

Near Clark's Fork, at the Yellowstone, Sioux estimated in number variously from seven hundred to two thousand attacked. In the rocky hillsides, Story and his men sat behind great boulders and calmly picked the Indians off. They were more afraid of the fifteen cowboys with their Remingtons—which the Fort Kearny troopers had jeered at—than they were of a whole detachment of troops.

One morning, close to the end of the trail, a lone horseman rode out of the valley shadows and hailed them genially.

"What took you so long?" he bellowed. It was Johnny Davis, the lost Johnny Davis who had broken away from his Indian captors and traveled seven hundred miles on a stolen Sioux horse to rejoin his outfit. The cowboys were delirious with delight, taking Johnny's reappearance as a good omen for the expedition and, too rough for other sentiment, drubbing the slat-thin refugee on the back for pure joy. They never did discover what unfortunate captive had burned at the willow stake along the trail.

Story's party had ridden out of Fort Kearny on October 22. On December 9, 1866, the entire outfit, to a man, trotted into Virginia City. At the head of the trail, Josephine Story waited to greet her husband. He had written her that he was coming through Powder River, and it had never occurred to Story's wife to doubt that he would make it.

In more ways than one it was a record making trip. After Story went up, the trail behind him closed as though it were barred, the valley swarmed with hostile Indians ready to wing anyone who was so rash as even to dabble his toe in the Powder River. Not for another four years did another trail herd pass up the Powder River Valley.



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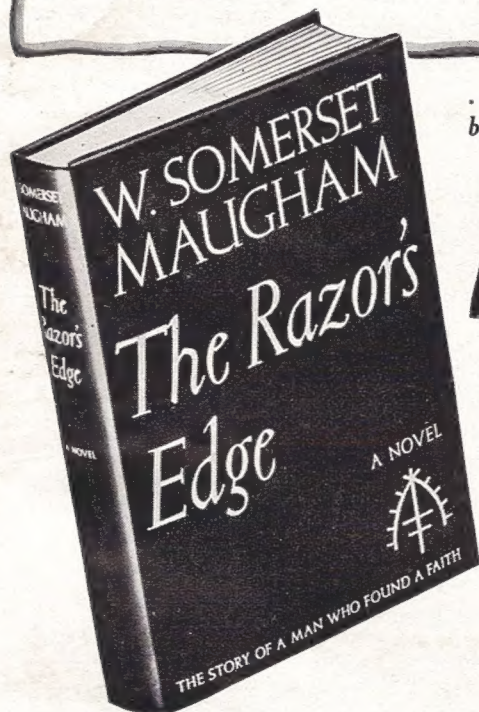
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